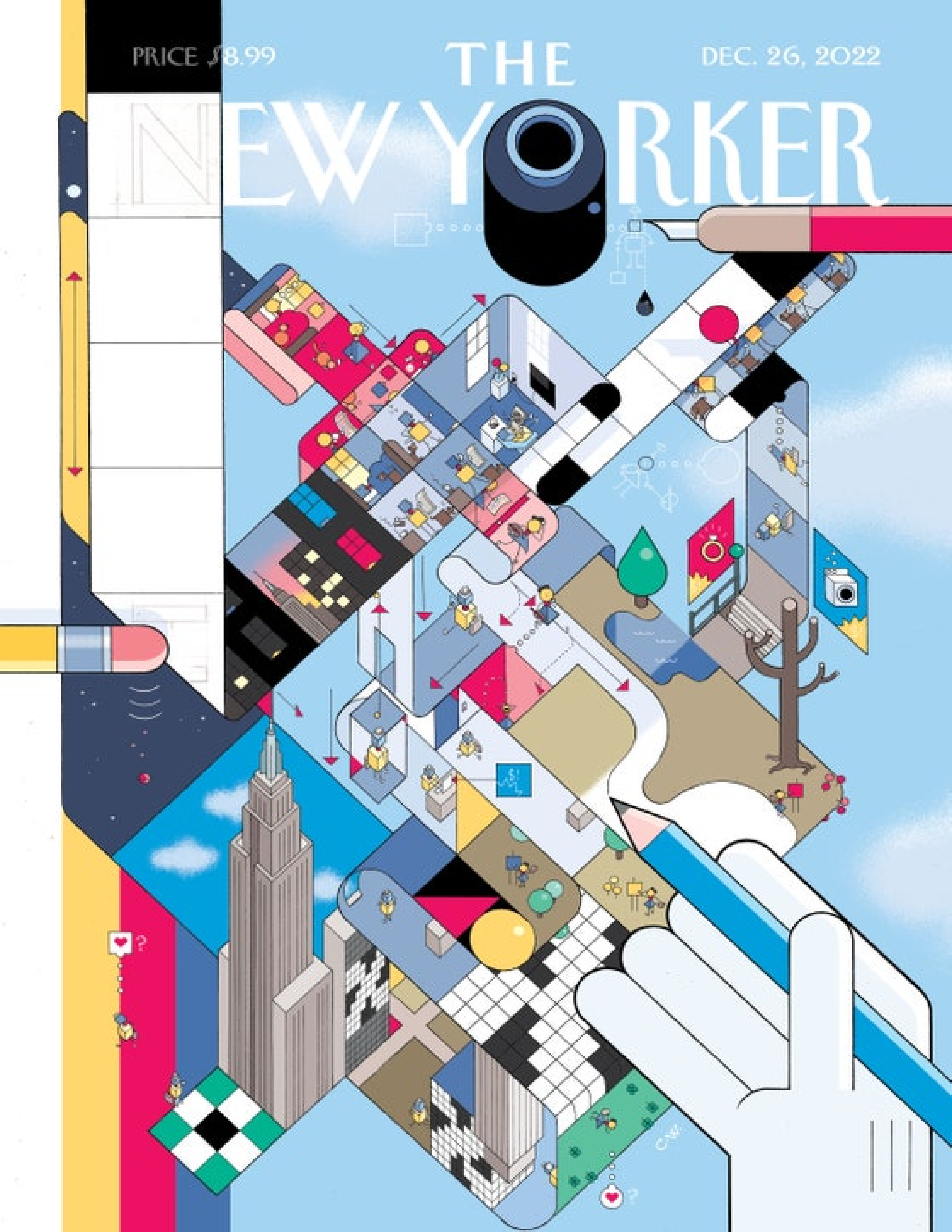

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A Critic at Large

- The Making of Norman Mailer

The Making of Norman Mailer

The young man went to war and became a novelist. But did he ever really come back?

By David Denby



When Norman Mailer was inducted into the Army, in March, 1944, he was a freshly married twenty-one-year-old Harvard graduate, a slight young man of five feet eight inches and a hundred and thirty-five pounds. In the previous few years, he had published some stories and written a play and two novels (one of them published, in a typescript facsimile, as "A Transit to Narcissus," in 1978). Even as a student, he thought of himself as a professional writer, and from the day that Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, in December, 1941, he had wanted to write a big book about the war. He was sent for basic training to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where many of the men were from Pennsylvania, the South, and the Upper Midwest. Mailer was from middle-class Jewish Brooklyn; he had landed in the great working-class Gentile world, and was eager to observe. He canvassed the recruits about their sex lives, taking notes on a yellow legal pad. (He discovered that many of them did not believe in foreplay.) Mailer knew that tough Jews served in the war, including criminals, louts, and bitterly determined, hardworking men, but he was without physical skills. He had never worked

a thresher, or manhandled heavy goods into a truck, or tinkered with Dad's jalopy.

In early January, 1945, General Douglas MacArthur landed with an enormous invasion force on Luzon, the largest of the Philippine islands; Mailer, after waiting in a troopship, went ashore a few weeks later. He was thrown as a rifleman into the 112th Cavalry Regiment, out of Texas. The 112th had been in combat in the Pacific for more than a year, and many men in the unit had died. Mailer described those who remained as a little crazy, and physically messed up—some with open ulcers from jungle rot. The Texans were joined by men from other parts of the country, some of them bar fighters and casual anti-Semites (not by theory but by habit). "I didn't open my mouth for six months in that outfit," he later said.

"The nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn"—that was the one image of himself that Mailer said was "absolutely insupportable." It was insupportable because, for a while, it was true. A picture of him in uniform from early in his service shows a young man with soft lips, large ears, a gentle gaze. He did indeed write his big war book, "The Naked and the Dead," and it presents a fascinating paradox. A tough, even pessimistic work, filled with sordid sensuality—muck and detestable odors; bodily discomforts and mutilations; the tedium, exhilarations, and cruelties of an army fighting in the jungle—it may also have been a book that only a nice Jewish boy could write. A nice Jewish boy, that is, in flight from his background.

It requires some effort to recall the young Mailer across the intervening years of turmoil. Beginning in the nineteen-fifties, as doggedly as an earlier puny American, Theodore Roosevelt, Mailer transformed himself into a barrel-chested macho—a man six times married, the father of eight children and an adopted son, and the author of more than forty books, some of them American classics ("The Armies of the Night," from 1968, and the supremely abundant and sympathetic "The Executioner's Song," a "true life novel," from 1979), some of them clogged and nearly unreadable. Attentive and sweet-natured much of the time—his letters to friends and even to strangers are generously supportive—he also brawled and headbutted at parties. He was decked, hammered, billy-clubbed; his eye was gouged. He believed that physical courage was necessary equipment for a great writer (Hemingway was the model), and that Jewish men in particular had to

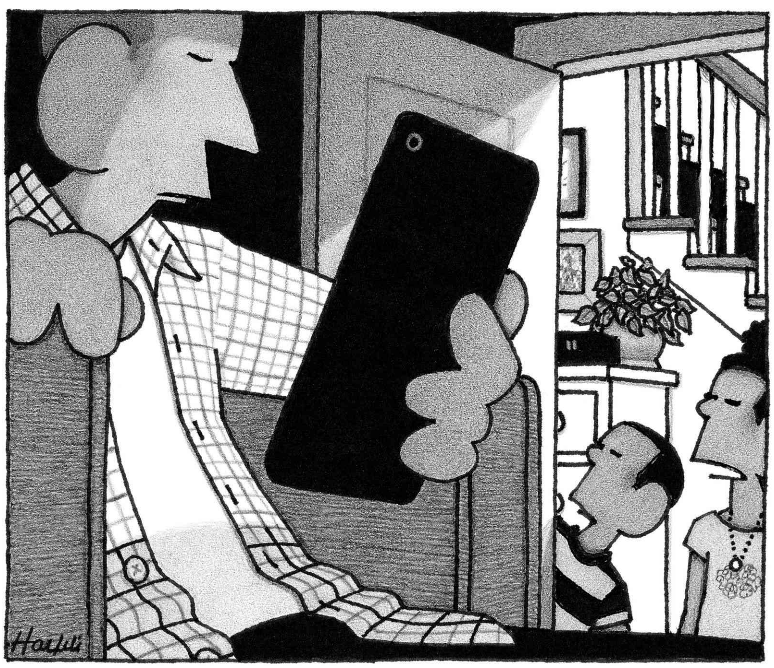
overcome all sorts of weaknesses. "In the first week / of their life / male jews / are crucified," he wrote in a poem. His recklessness encompassed an abominable act: at the end of a drunken party, in 1960, he twice stabbed Adele Morales, his second wife and the mother of two of his children. "I let God down," Mailer later told Betsy Mailer, one of his daughters with Adele.

For good and for ill, that was the Mailer the world knew for more than fifty years. When he died, in 2007, at the age of eighty-four, his reputation was at a low ebb. His temperament and preoccupations seemed artifacts of a bygone and benighted era. And not without reason. His reactionary sexual politics, expressed at length in the rapturously composed but morally preposterous polemic "The Prisoner of Sex," published in *Harper's*, in 1971, have been at the center of searing critiques for a half century.

Still, writers have a way of losing their labels. In the nineteen-forties, T. S. Eliot, Lionel Trilling, Edmund Wilson, and George Orwell all wrote essays about Rudyard Kipling, retrieving what was aesthetically and emotionally satisfying from the bitter effusions of a rank imperialist and racist; some four decades later, Edward Said and other post-colonial critics and scholars continued the effort of defending the art embedded in the toxic mesh of Kipling's attitudes. Mailer is a very different writer, but a similar kind of sorting out may be in the works, especially now that a major revival of interest in him has begun. The Library of America, which has brought out two volumes of Mailer's writing from the sixties, is now reissuing "The Naked and the Dead," in honor of Mailer's hundredth birthday, on January 31st. The volume is edited by J. Michael Lennon, whose many-sided biography, "Norman Mailer: A Double Life" (2013), is by far the best that the author has received. Lennon has accompanied the novel's text with a selection of the extraordinary letters that Mailer wrote from the battlefield to his first wife, Beatrice Silverman. Many additional projects devoted to Mailer are under way or have been proposed, including selections from his mid-fifties philosophical and erotic journal, a collection of his writings on democracy, a Showtime documentary, two TV series, and extended critical studies by Christopher Ricks and David Bromwich. In a new book, "Tough Guy: The Life of Norman Mailer," the British literary scholar and biographer Richard Bradford has produced an almost entirely negative portrait of a man whose life is "wonderfully grotesque," and yet the book's very existence attests to a more complicated reality. It would be naïve to

suppose that the renewed attention on Mailer has nothing to do with the scandals attached to his name. It would also be naïve to pretend that he was not a great American writer.

Mailer’s father, Isaac (Barney) Mailer, was born near Vilnius, Lithuania, but moved with his family in 1900 to South Africa; he served in the British Army during the First World War. In America, he spoke with a punctilious English accent. In all, he was a strange bird—a mock Brit, a Jewish accountant, and a passionate gambler, frequently in debt. In 1922, Barney Mailer married Fanny Schneider. She had grown up in Long Branch, New Jersey, the daughter of a Lithuanian rabbi who never officially practiced in America. (According to a relative, the elder Schneider believed that “rabbis were *shnorrers*.”) At home in Crown Heights, just east of Prospect Park, Fanny, a loving, capable woman, raised Norman and his sister, Barbara, while managing a home-oil-delivery business by telephone. The Jewish-folkloric combination of a weak father and a strong mother evidently benefitted Fanny’s son, who drew power from the devotion of his parents, aunts, and uncles throughout his seventy-year writing career.



“If it’s horizontal, he’s watching a movie. If it’s vertical, he’s watching a book.”
Cartoon by William Haefeli

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As a child, Norman was quiet and obedient, too preoccupied with his studies to spend much time among the neighborhood *bonditts*, with their pranks and their passion for stickball. On the way to school (Boys High, in Bedford-Stuyvesant), he kept his head down, avoiding fights with the local Italian

and Irish street gangs, and with the local Jewish toughs as well. He built model airplanes, some of them extremely impressive, and spent his summers, with Barbara, in a resort hotel in Long Branch, run by one of his aunts. In a spare room, he would write fiction.

In September, 1939, Mailer showed up at Harvard in an outfit of orange-striped trousers, a gold jacket, and saddle shoes. He was sixteen, and found himself as ignorant about ruling-class undergraduates and the social rituals of the college as he was, five years later, about the habits of working-class Americans. The clothes were soon discarded, though some of his regular laundry was sent home, washed by the family's Black maid, and mailed back. In his first year on campus, he ate dinner with other Jewish boys at the Harvard Union and began to feel his way around. Until the end of his sophomore year, he lived almost entirely within the protected boundaries of the American Jewish middle class.

At the time, Latin was a prerequisite for English majors at Harvard; Mailer had never studied it, so he became an engineering major, learning much that would serve him well when he reconstructed the liftoff of the Saturn V rocket in "Of a Fire on the Moon" (1970), his impassioned report on the Apollo 11 moon landing. His main occupation at school was reading, particularly the American realists he discovered as a freshman—James T. Farrell (the Studs Lonigan trilogy), John Dos Passos (the U.S.A. trilogy), John Steinbeck ("The Grapes of Wrath"). Faulkner and Fitzgerald and Thomas Wolfe came afterward, and Hemingway served as a (distant) spiritual mentor. Hemingway's hunting, fishing, and boxing, his war exploits, his courageous and soulful physicality—boastful yet wounded—bore little resemblance to the habits of Crown Heights Jews. Mailer fell in love.

His own problem as a writer, he believed, was a lack of experience. Escaping from Harvard's rich preppies and ambitious Jews, he rode the subway around Boston, taking notes on working-class behavior, clothes, and accents. In the summer after his sophomore year, he left his hotel room on the Jersey shore with just a few dollars in his pocket and hitchhiked his way down to North Carolina, sleeping outdoors at night. Voluntarily, and for only two weeks, he became that familiar Depression-era figure, a hobo. When he returned home, Fanny made him take off his clothes before coming inside.

His lack of sexual experience was particularly mortifying. “You bore a standard of shame,” he later said of himself and his friends. He at least lost his physical inhibitions. He played football in front of Dunster House, and loved the bone-jarring contact. At a Boston Symphony concert during his junior year, he met Beatrice (Bea) Silverman, a lively music major attending Boston University. She was argumentative, a passionate lefty, and a proto-feminist; she was also profane and, in the appreciative slang of the day, “earthy.” They carried on in the mattressed trunk of a Chevy given to Mailer by his uncle, and, at Dunster, they became known for their lovemaking in Mailer’s dorm room. Bea would talk dirty in front of his friends; they were both showing off. They got married in secret, in January, 1944. His draft notice arrived a week later.

What Mailer did in the war was not heroic. At first, working at headquarters on Luzon, he typed reports, laid wire, built a shower for officers. Humiliated and bored, he volunteered for a reconnaissance squad. He went on twenty-five patrols, many of them fifteen miles long, and he finally saw some combat: nothing much, as he admitted, but he knew what it was like to climb up a damp, rocky hill in the heat while burdened with a rifle, ammunition, grenades, two canteens, a steel helmet—perhaps forty pounds in all. His real mission was to see the worst and make an account of it. He wrote long letters to Bea (who had joined the Waves), some of which were detailed and harrowing. He was not just creating the book but creating himself as a man. In February, 1945, he entered a Japanese-held town that the Americans had overwhelmed with artillery and tanks. A letter to Bea chronicled what he saw:

> Right before us was a destroyed Japanese armored half-track and a tank. The vehicles were still smoldering, and the driver of the half-track had half fallen out, his head which was crushed from one ear to the jaw lay reclining on the running board, and the pitiful remaining leg thrust tensely through the windshield. The other leg lay near his head on the ground, and a little smoke was still arising from his chest. Another Japanese lay on his back a short distance away with a great hole in his intestines which bunched out in a thick white cluster like a coiled white garden hose. . . .

> After a half hour or so we descended to the road, and mounted the Jeep again. As we drove along the road the destruction was complete. Fragments of the corrugated steel from the warehouses had landed everywhere, and the wreckage formed almost a pattern on the road. Everything stunk, and everything, the road, the wreckage, the mutilated vehicles had become the two colors of conflagration—the rust red and the black. The whole vista was of destroyed earth and materiel—that battlefield looked like a hybrid between a junk-yard and a charnel house; it was perhaps the ugliest most dejecting sight I have ever seen. You wished acutely for rain, as the quick hand-maiden to time.

Some of the writing wound up in "The Naked and the Dead." The impressions are fresh: war meant the destruction of the body's unity, the collapse of physical structure, color, intactness.

After the Japanese surrendered, in August, 1945, Mailer became part of the American force occupying the home islands. He worked mainly as an Army cook, which he enjoyed. He attained the rank of sergeant, and sent his family a picture of himself in uniform looking much older than in the earlier photograph—now darkly handsome, with square shoulders and a full head of hair in the style of the actor John Garfield. Soon after that picture was taken, though, he got into a humiliating quarrel with a superior and turned in his stripes. He left the Army in 1946 as a private, after a little more than two years of service. He and Bea settled in Brooklyn and Provincetown. He wrote "The Naked and the Dead" at a rate of five thousand words a week, finishing in about fifteen months, including new and rewritten sections. The book received rave reviews and was an overnight best-seller, remaining on the *Times* list for more than a year. The Brooklyn Jewish boy was no longer abashed, no longer inadequate, and certainly no longer quiet.

In 1960, looking back on the book, Mailer described his state of mind in a letter to his friend Diana Trilling, the literary critic. "There is no meaning but the present," he wrote. "So of course I could do *The Naked and the Dead.* I had no past to protect, no habits to hold on to, no style to defend. My infirmity is that I had no emotional memory." This is an attempt at mythmaking. He sounds as if he were creating himself as he went along, though what he actually meant by "no emotional memory" was no memory he was proud of. Henry Roth, in "Call It Sleep" (1934), and Alfred Kazin, in

“A Walker in the City” (1951), had done a great deal with the furtive behavior of a Jewish boy on the streets, but Mailer saw his childhood as something not to explore but to transcend. He drew heavily on the American realists, especially Dos Passos, in constructing his own version of wartime naturalism, piling up endless physical detail and moments of emotional suffering.

“The Naked and the Dead” is set on the fictional island of Anopopei, an irregular kidney-shaped blob in the Pacific with trackless vegetation and withering wet heat—and also thousands of Japanese defenders, though they hardly figure in the novel. Mailer never tells us how the Anopopei campaign fits into the Americans’ strategy. The absence is intentional: strategy is left to officers, who, in Mailer’s estimate, are mainly self-important stiffs. What matters most in the book is the day-to-day lives of fourteen soldiers in a reconnaissance platoon, who find themselves trapped between the obsessions of two pathological egotists—the island commander, General Edward Cummings, a MacArthur-like military intellectual who thinks that men can be controlled only through fear (“the natural role of twentieth-century man is anxiety,” he says), and, at the platoon level, Staff Sergeant Sam Croft, a nerveless warrior who “could not have said . . . where his hands ended and the machine gun began.” For Croft, killing seems a natural expression of his being. In a limited way, he’s intensely admirable. Writing to Bea, Mailer described his creation of Croft as “an archetype of all the dark, bitter, inarticulate, capable and brooding men that America spawns.” Capability meant a great deal to the young writer.

Mailer wrote a terrifying combat scene (armies firing across a river at night), but much of the novel chronicles the routine work of men at war: unloading supplies, building a road, cleaning weapons, “harsh eventless days” followed by such exertions as pulling 37-mm. anti-tank guns down a jungle path in darkness. (Seen in the light of a flare, “the guns had a slender articulated beauty like an insect reared back on its wire haunches.”) In the central action of the novel, General Cummings, eager to show off his tactical prowess, sends the platoon on a recon mission that turns out to be foolish, even superfluous, and Croft, ready to test himself, willingly carries it out, sacrificing men en route. He tries to take the platoon over the island’s big mountain, Anaka—which he thinks of as *his* mountain, as Ahab thinks of the whale. But the labor of ascending Anaka is far from exalting, and the men

curse it the whole way. In the end, Croft’s mountain worship goes nowhere. Somewhere near the peak, he stumbles into a hornets’ nest, and the enraged insects cause the men to abandon their packs and rifles and scatter down the slope like children. Cummings’s regular infantry, under the command of a mediocre officer (Cummings is away), wipes out the remaining Japanese garrison.



“I am the Ghost of Christmas Past—here to remind you that you were once young and thin.”
Cartoon by Brooke Bourgeois

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When Mailer worked on the book, right after the war, jubilation was a large part of the national mood—a cheerfully militant atmosphere of gallant warriors and sleeves-rolled-up citizens fighting Fascism in “the good war.” During the war and just after, Hollywood movies portrayed the democratic unit—an ethnically mixed platoon or bomber crew—as a vessel of a great national cause. But Mailer writes without the slightest elation over American victory and Japanese defeat, and his platoon is less a common cause than a group of ornery, banged-up soldiers hoping to survive. Unlike Kipling, who overcame a miserable, bullied childhood in part by identifying with the strong (especially those of the British Empire), Mailer expressed contempt for powerful men bereft of human understanding. He was attracted to violence as an exploration of personal will, while despising authority in any institutional form.

The over-all emotion of the novel is one of futility. Accident, not strategy, rules. Cummings and Croft could be seen as incipient postwar American Fascists, highbrow and lowbrow, but both of them wind up stymied. The book asks, What is the point of endless effort and repetition? Is persistence life’s only meaning? The postwar celebratory mood was shadowed by

disillusionment and absurdism. As Mailer was bringing out "The Naked and the Dead," in 1948, Samuel Beckett was in Paris writing "Waiting for Godot." As a war novel, Mailer's book looks back to Stephen Crane's "The Red Badge of Courage" (1895), with its confused, even incoherent battle scenes—all smoke and noise—and forward to Joseph Heller's "Catch-22" (1961), in which the war and Army bureaucracy are rendered as a malign joke, dissolving any possible purpose into contradiction.

Mailer wrote "The Naked and the Dead" in an omniscient floating third person, moving from the mind of one man to that of another. The coarseness of the soldiers' thoughts and speech shocked some readers in 1948, though now it seems to us the way men in combat have always talked. As we discover in lengthy, bristling flashbacks, many of the men had been knocking around in Depression America, working on farms, in stores, in ordinary jobs, or not working much at all. Vaguely rebellious yet defeated, they are callous and cynical about women, and routinely contemptuous of "Yids" and "Izzies." These hard-luck guys have little purpose in their lives. Lieutenant Hearn, a Harvard graduate like Mailer, appears, at first, to be the hero of the novel, a liberal in revolt against his wealthy family. But Hearn is unfocussed and diffident, pulled by his own narcissism into confrontations with General Cummings that will destroy him. This war book has some courageous fighters and some generous acts, but it has neither heroes nor innocents. Unlike "the youth" in "The Red Badge of Courage," no one has any illusions to lose.

For all Mailer's hard knowledge of failure, his prose is little like that of his hero, Hemingway. It is not spare, stoic, and flowingly lyrical (from "A Farewell to Arms": "Late in the afternoon the rain stopped and from out number two post I saw the bare wet autumn country with clouds over the tops of the hills and the straw screening over the roads wet and dripping") but abrupt, obsessional, and grimly material. Mailer, describing men attempting to carry a wounded buddy on a stretcher back to safety, unleashes the enduring achievement of the book, his portrayal of the male body at the outer edge of fatigue:

> Through the afternoon the litter-bearers continued on their march. About two o'clock it began to rain, and the ground quickly became muddy. The rain at first was a relief; they welcomed it on their blazing

> flesh, wriggled their toes in the slosh that permeated their boots. The wetness of their clothing was pleasurable. They enjoyed being cold for a few minutes. But as the rain continued the ground became too soft, and their uniforms cleaved uncomfortably to their bodies. Their feet began to slip in the mud, their shoes became weighted with muck and stuck in the ground with each step. They were too fagged to notice the difference immediately, their bodies had quickly resumed the stupor of the march, but by half an hour they had slowed down almost to a halt. Their legs had lost almost all puissance; for minutes they would stand virtually in place, unable to co-ordinate their thighs and feet to move forward. . . . The sun came out again, inflamed the wet kunai grass and dried the earth whose moisture rose in sluggish clouds of mist. The men gasped, took deep useless breaths of the leaden wet air, and shambled forward grunting and sobbing, their arms slowly and inevitably bending toward the ground.

On a bad day, a soldier will know every wretchedness of skin, lungs, arms, legs, bowels, kidneys. "The Naked and the Dead" is repetitive but at times very moving; the men carrying the stretcher reach a state, beyond exhaustion, in which "they were reduced to the lowest common denominator of their existence," and meet it with acceptance. As Mailer's letters to Bea reveal, he was shocked by the corrupted materiality of jungle war: the spilling corpses, the breakdown of physical integrity. But his writing about the living male body amounts to a full-throated humanist response: the body under stress is heroic, living in its wholeness, with consciousness remaining intact, even when vibrating with pain.

At the same time, "The Naked and the Dead" is surprisingly delicate in feeling. The rare moments of solidarity among the men give way to scraped emotions and anger, followed by distance and bitter hurt. The two Jews in the platoon, Roth and Goldstein, struggle especially hard for dignity—an obvious point of concern for Mailer, who had his own anxieties to resolve. Roth has been to City College in New York (the home of New York Jews in the thirties); he's married, but he's not getting anywhere. An irritable guy, he's snobby, morose, and too weak to survive—clearly Mailer's disapproving version of himself. Mailer endowed Goldstein with greater physical and moral strength. Like some earlier Jewish writers, Mailer saw virtue in a life of physical activity and advanced moral adventure: what Max

Nordau, at the Zionist Congress in 1898, called *Muskeljudentum*, or "muscular Judaism"—a disavowal of endless study and effete intellection. Goldstein, along with a very serious Christian, attempts to carry the wounded soldier out of the jungle. As a boy, Goldstein heard his grandfather talk of Jewish suffering in the back of the family's candy store in Brooklyn. It meant nothing to him at the time, but when he's bearing the stretcher the words of the medieval sage Judah Halevi jump into his head: "Israel is the heart of all nations." Goldstein's consciousness as a Jew keeps him from letting go, for, if he fails, the men will think badly not just of him but of all Jews. In the character of Goldstein, Mailer's fear that he was not tough enough for the Army ends in a portrait of formidable endurance.

The enormous success of "The Naked and the Dead" left Mailer uneasy. He had no idea how he was going to live up to it. Seemingly on top of the world at twenty-five, he feared many things. In his novel, the Harvard-educated liberal allows himself to be trapped by power. Mailer, in his own eyes, needed to escape the traps not only of his soft middle-class Jewish background but also of postwar America—the desire for "security," the endless consumerism, and what he took to be the country's humiliating spiritual mediocrity. It's as if he were still in the jungle, pulling artillery through the night. He had made himself into a novelist in the Pacific, and now he brought the war home, fighting on two fronts—against what he disliked in himself and against those menaces of the nineteen-fifties, "conformity" and "adjustment." He acted out his rebellion in a continual performance with phallus, fists, booze, and sustained ass-in-chair writing sessions—a pressure at times noble, at times foolish, and certainly rough on other people as well as on himself. He became an egotist of a peculiarly self-afflicting sort, both calculating and spontaneous, provoking many blows, all of them deserved, all of them welcomed. For the author of "The Naked and the Dead," the truce never arrived. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

Art

- **Inspired Insect Origami at the American Museum of Natural History**

Inspired Insect Origami at the American Museum of Natural History

The museum's tree, graced with beetles, butterflies, and more, follows tradition and looks ahead, to the insectarium and the butterfly vivarium opening in February.



The origami menagerie that graces the tree at the **American Museum of Natural History** (through Jan. 8) includes beetles, butterflies, and grasshoppers, in both a nod to the past and a preview of coming attractions. The museum's holiday tradition dates back to the early seventies, when the entomologist Alice Gray began folding paper-bug ornaments for the staff. This year's specimens are inspired by the insectarium and the butterfly vivarium opening, on Feb. 17, in the new Gilder Center for Science, Education, and Innovation.

By Robert Moor

By Richard Brody

By David Remnick

By Ted Geltner

Astral Plane Dept.

- **What Susan Miller Would Have Told Louis Vuitton’s Mother**

What Susan Miller Would Have Told Louis Vuitton's Mother

The cult stargazer behind Astrology Zone gave a talk in the old Barneys basement, amid two hundred customized L.V. trunks. One of her predictions involved Barron Trump.

By Doreen St. Félix



The astrologer Susan Miller perched on a wooden cube in the basement of what used to be Barneys. "I'm going to start a museum for taxpayers," she said, "and I'm going to be the blockbuster exhibit." There's no truth to the rumors that Apple partially owns Astrology Zone, the Web site that Miller founded in 1995, where her monthly horoscopes draw 1.3 million unique readers. The I.R.S. has audited her seven times, she said, without finding a single error.

Miller was at the Madison Avenue space to give a talk, gratis, in connection with Louis Vuitton, which has installed a pop-up display called "200 Trunks, 200 Visionaries." The company asked two hundred somebodies (including Miller) to design a trunk to mark the malletier's second centennial. Archivists passed her Vuitton's birth information, and she drew up his chart.

“If I was in the hospital when Louis was born,” she said, “I would tell his mother that her son would be very successful.” The Miller trunk looks like an haute school science project: space-blue on the exterior, with a circular aperture that reveals the inside, where orbs representing Saturn and Pluto hang. Saturn, she said, “is very similar to Balanchine. He was a hard teacher, but the things you get with Saturn you never lose.”

Miller does not disclose her age or birth date. (A fair guess would place it sometime in the nineteen-fifties.) Readers would have a field day if they could draw up her astrological chart, she explained. The reticence about her age enhances her Upper East Side grand-dame élan. The spirit of Barneys was alive in her look: flesh-toned flats, a rose-printed sheath, drop earrings peeking through her blowout. “I love Dolce & Gabbana,” she gushed, pronouncing it “*dol-say*,” thumbing a crucifix hanging from a necklace. Celebrities (Pharrell, Kerry Washington) are her friends. Machers in fashion come to her for counsel. “Cynthia Rowley, she had a bad date for the fashion show. Mercury’s turning, too many models cancelling,” Miller recalled. Rowley took her advice and changed the date. Miller also helps novelists flesh out characters when they get stuck.

Her verbosity is legend. Each horoscope tends to run more than three thousand words. She writes from her couch or in bed, with “Law & Order” playing in the background. An unspecified illness, at fourteen, kept her in bed for a year. She lifted the hem of her dress to reveal a scar on her leg. When her health problems cause her to be late with her horoscopes, which happens often, her followers can get miffed. “I’ve had forty blood transfusions,” she said.

Her mother, whom readers know as “Little Mom,” practiced the astrological arts. She told her daughter that she would be a writer, and that, around the age of forty, she’d begin working with a new form of technology. Susie chased her mother around as she vacuumed, hungry for more information. “She said there are little invisible dots or lines that go through the air that have something to do with your writing,” Miller recalled. “She predicted the Internet!”

As a young woman, Miller abandoned her dream of becoming a photographer, and became a photo agent instead. Directed in part by Little

Mom, she studied astrology, and became accredited in 1995. She recently launched an online community called Susan Miller's Stars. To become a member, you must buy one of her N.F.T.s, for $199.99. She also sells a Cosmic Beauty box of "mostly full-size products," for forty dollars.

Once thirty-odd people had assembled, Miller picked up a microphone and asked, "Did anybody have a terrible day today?"

A security guard nodded, as did some audience members. "First of all, this isn't a girl thing," Miller said. She talked about a meeting she'd had with Time Inc., in the nineties, and bristling at an executive's suggestion that she write her horoscopes with women in mind. In ancient Mesopotamia, she said, male leaders consulted astrologers to protect their citizens. "I'm friends with a mathematician from Harvard," she said.

Returning to her question, she said, "I had a very hard day. Someone at the company left and still has the company computer. We haven't backed it up yet."

A Capricorn raised her hand: "My partner told me he may be moving to London."

"I think moving to London is exciting," Miller replied. The Capricorn looked chastened by Miller's optimism. An Aquarius with a topknot raised a hand: "My best friend of eight years, we just had our first fight."

Miller asked where she was from. "Kazakhstan? You're the first person I ever met from your country." She suggested that the friends go on a vacation to "a happy place, like New Orleans." She advised a lovelorn Sagittarian publisher to "get away from your computer and socialize until the month of May." To a Libra in hot pink who needed real-estate advice: "Don't close until January 18th."

Miller was surprised that not many Pisces had shown up. She says that they're generous. "Barron Trump is a Pisces," she said. "He's going to give away his father's money to philanthropy." ♦

By Rachel Aviv

By Rebecca Mead

By Patricia Marx

By John Lahr

Books

- **Robin Coste Lewis’s Family Album**
- **Briefly Noted**

Robin Coste Lewis's Family Album

The poet's new book of photographs and verse is haunted by the dead who will not stay dead.

By Hilton Als



The poet Robin Coste Lewis's second collection, the exquisite "To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness" (Knopf), is a book about how the dead do not stay dead. Not only because the author believes, or wants to believe, that she can awaken the deceased with her pen—"I am trying to make the dead clap and shout," she writes—but because those who are gone are determined not to stay put. Not in the heart, and certainly not in memory.

In a sense, Lewis's elegiac and haunted volume, filled with both words and photographs, found her long before she conceived it. Twenty-five years ago, Lewis was living in Rhode Island, teaching at Wheaton College and writing fiction. (She had received a B.A. from Hampshire College, where she compared African and South Asian diasporic literature, in 1989, and studied Sanskrit and comparative religious literature at Harvard's Divinity School, where she earned a master's degree in 1997.) But she returned home to Los Angeles after the death of her maternal grandmother, Dorothy Mary Coste Thomas Brooks, to empty out her house, which was going to be razed.

Under Brooks's bed, Lewis found a suitcase containing hundreds of photographs—some in black-and-white, some in color, some posed, others candid—that were a record not only of Lewis's large extended family but of worlds that had vanished, of decisive moments that had come and gone during the Second Great Migration, of which Lewis's family, which originated in Louisiana, had been a part. It was unclear who had taken the photographs, but, by collecting the images and storing them together in that suitcase, Brooks had created a kind of narrative. It fell to her granddaughter to place it within the larger history of humanity.

Rather like Pilate, in Toni Morrison's 1977 novel, "Song of Solomon," who carries around the bones of her father because doing so, she says, "frees up your mind"—which is to say, frees you from the burden of history so that you can think about other things—Lewis has now been carrying her forebears with her for a quarter century. These bones don't so much free up her mind as feed her imagination—and quarrel with the usual ways in which history gets told. "To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness" assembles a hundred and seventy-nine photographs from Brooks's collection; interspersed with the images are short poems, sometimes just a line or two, that look like ticker tape from a ghostly world and read like messages in bottles cast out to sea by an emotionally marooned person with a surfeit of longing, hoping for love.

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Lewis is no stranger to psychological or physical injury. When I first spoke to her, for a radio interview in 2015, she recounted a terrible accident she'd had in 2001: after dining at a restaurant in San Francisco, she got up to get her coat and fell into a hole in the floor that had not been cordoned off. She suffered brain damage, to the extent that doctors told her she wouldn't be able to write more than one line a day. So she worked on a line every day in her mind. Other lines followed. This was when she transitioned from writing prose to writing poetry.

The title of "To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness" is taken from a line by the Black Arctic explorer Matthew Henson, who is the subject of a long narrative poem that falls in the middle of the collection: "The effect of such storms of wind and snow, or rain, is abject physical terror, due to the realization of perfect helplessness." The Henson poem is not accompanied by images and, unlike the rest of the volume, is printed on white paper, rather than black: Henson's polar snow sprinkled with his Black life in Lewis's words. The book's design is important, as it raises questions about what the eye sees and what the mind retains. Printing the images, shorter poems, and isolated lines against a black background evokes old-fashioned photo albums and drives home how modern technology has robbed photographs of their tactility, even as it has saved them from destruction.

Those black pages also represent Lewis's interest in blackness—as a color, as a symbol, as a race, and as a defining element of her own heritage.

Like many readers, I admired Lewis's first collection, "Voyage of the Sable Venus and Other Poems"—a meditation on, among other things, women's bodies, family lore, and Black slaveowners in the antebellum South—which was awarded the 2015 National Book Award for poetry. A large part of my approbation had to do with her seriousness about the past, her understanding of how it both weighs us down and lights the way in all the moments we share with the living and the dead.

In a sharp prose prologue, Lewis listed the rules she set for herself when writing the volume's title poem—a nearly eighty-page work. "Voyage of the Sable Venus," she explained, is "comprised solely and entirely of the titles, catalog entries, or exhibit descriptions of Western art objects in which a black female figure is present, dating from 38,000 BCE to the present." Then:

> 1. No title could be broken or changed in any way. While the grammar is completely modified—I erased all periods, commas, semicolons—each title was left as published, and was not syntactically annotated, edited, or fragmented.
>
> 2. "Art" included paintings, sculpture, installations, photography, lithographs, engravings, any work on paper, et cetera—all those traditional mediums now recognized by the Western art-historical canon.

Lewis also incorporated, as she noted, "titles of art *by* black women curators and artists, whether the art included a black female figure or not," and "by black queer artists, regardless of gender, because this body of work has made consistently some of the richest, most elegant, least pretentious contributions to Western art interrogations of gender and race."

"Voyage of the Sable Venus" is part history and part homage, an epic song built from shards, a reflection of the Black women Lewis saw in art work after art work who had been broken into pieces by Western eyes. From the opening section, titled "The Ship's Inventory":

Four-Breasted Vessel, Three Women
in Front of a Steamy Pit, Two-Faced
Head Fish Trying on Earrings, Unidentified.

Young Woman with Shawl
and Painted Backdrop, Pearl
of the Forest, Two Girls

with Braids People
on a Ship with Some Dancing
Girls. Our Lady of Mercy, Blue.

Through these titles, Lewis captured the ways in which Black women had been aestheticized across the millennia, pinned to a history that found them interesting for various reasons—their skin color, their hair, their culture—without ever letting them live their lives. And what were those lives? Burned, choked, fired, glazed on a vase. “Voyage of the Sable Venus” gives those women a new life and the freedom to voyage away from art, even as Lewis creates it.

“To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness” is another voyage. But the view is different, as is the destination: what Lewis is resuscitating here is a community, a family she knew or wishes she’d known—although they might have been suspicious of her. (Artists are often viewed with skepticism by their families, since part of their job is to rip at the fabric of relationships, the better to reveal the truth of being. Lucille Clifton wittily captured that skepticism in her poem “here rests,” in which she recalled her sister saying, “when you poem this / and you will she would say / remember the Book of Job.”)

“Black people are part of everyone and everything,” Lewis, who has Afro-Creole roots, told me in 2016, when her second book hadn’t yet fully taken shape in her mind. I was visiting Los Angeles, and we were sitting near her home in Silver Lake. It was the golden hour, and Lewis’s brown freckles stood out against her toffee-colored skin. Her family had left New Orleans for California in the nineteen-fifties, and she wanted to delve deeper into the history of human migration. Louisiana, she said, had been “a mythical place” for her when she was growing up. “My family’s history, for sure, but

the history of that place, the beauty of that place, period, is so intense to me," she said. "And it's the lost country. We were raised that way: this place is far, and we'll never get back. It definitely felt like I was a child of exiles."

In her new book, she wanted to marry her feelings about the omnipresence of Blackness to a kind of history of photography. She told me then, with great excitement, that she had discovered that the first Black poetry anthology "published on the North American landmass" had been put out in New Orleans in 1845, in French, by freemen of color, and that the first daguerreotype in the American South is thought to have been produced by a man of color, in 1839. White supremacy, she said, had necessitated Black nationalism. But what saddened Lewis about looking at art history solely in the context of a Black-nationalist agenda was that it tended to minimize the contributions of the artists of color who produced work on flowers or other traditionally "beautiful" subjects. "Nationalism is a sneaky little bitch," she said. "Because how it affected our scholarship is people saying that those brothers"—the nineteenth-century freemen who made books and images—"had fucked-up politics, they had slaves, some other people were passing, and meanwhile I'm, like, No, no, no, that's what's so interesting, because you're getting to see just how fluid and elastic Blackness really is. In 1845, it's almost two decades before Emancipation, and they're publishing a fucking poetry anthology? And in French? And you don't give a shit 'cause they want to write about flowers? I say fucking congratulations to a motherfucker who's writing about flowers in the antebellum South. How did you pull off that psychological feat?"

Nearly everything Lewis talked about that afternoon shows up in "To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness," but it has been transmogrified by time, and by Lewis's long search for a self that belongs to artistic, intellectual, and ethnic tribes but doesn't allow a political stance to limit her defiantly Black and female creative vision. The poet opens her new book with childhood photographs of her three older siblings. Soon after that, accompanying a snapshot of Lewis, days old and squalling in a hospital crib, comes this text:

> I snuck in next, taking up home
> inside her salty red grave,
> and here I became alive and suspicious.

Lewis’s tone in the short poems in “To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness” brings to mind other writers, including Muriel Rukeyser and Ai and early Toni Morrison, who had a special interest in women’s bodies, and in rendering sensuality on the page as something deep and evolutionary. Lewis is a romantic, greedy for love, but wary of it, too, because love is the first thing that life hurts. Life disrupts even the ultimate forms of closeness: with one’s mother and with Mother Earth. Through birth, we leave one salty red grave for another.

The next photograph in the book is of a Black woman posing at a studio. She wears a long dark skirt, and her hair is tied back. Her impassive face, the studio backdrop: Could we be in New Orleans, before Lewis’s family journeyed west? We can’t know, because time has robbed us of so much, even of the origin of *us*. (Lewis names the people in the photographs, where possible, in an appendix, but does not identify their relationship to her.) Lewis has the ardor and the delicacy of an archeologist who knows that these totems, these relics of the past, these tombs dug in warm earth crawling with worms and sunshine, could, with patience, reveal an entire city—a metropolis of the self.

A picture of Lewis’s mother from the fifties—a thin, vibrant-looking woman with cropped hair, holding a bouquet (Is it her wedding day? The beginning of the story that will lead to Robin?)—is accompanied by this lyric:

> I have been
>   thinking about you
>   again today,
>
> as I do—
>   so often—think of you,
>   wondering
>
> if people can see the sky
>   of our childhood
>   the way we still see (the sky)
>
> whenever we think
>   of each other.

Well, not see, but feel—

the way
every feeling
has a trillion eyes.

Lewis's love of women—she is openly queer—is one of the incredibly sweet (but never saccharine) elements of this book. It's the matriarchs, with their strength, their mystery, their complications, who have a hold on Lewis and will not let her go, just as her grandmother's visual treasure trove will not let her go. Turn the page in "To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness" and you'll find Lewis's mother now standing at what appears to be a banquet. A young couple separate her from an attractive young man. Are they the hosts of the party? Are they the bride and groom, embarking on a grand adventure? By this point, you understand that Lewis is doing something different with captions. Hers are filled not with factual information but with emotion. Her words direct us to the beauty of what she sees in her mother's face:

There are days
when all I want
is to hold your hand

and walk down Wilmington—
two girls who can feel
all the galaxies inside

and no one
to understand—
or even fathom—that

Words change pictures, just as pictures expand on words. Sometimes, going through Lewis's book, I was reminded of Walter Benjamin's wonderful 1931 essay "Little History of Photography," and, in particular, his take on loneliness in photographs. The wedding-banquet photo has all the signs of what I call "Negro specificity"—elegant place settings, flowers, hair, and suits just so—that speak of what has been achieved, and of what will be achieved by the generation that follows. But isn't achievement, by

definition, a lonely thing? One that separates you, economically and otherwise, from those who came before you?

That "beauty in order," as the playwright Adrienne Kennedy described it in her scrapbook-as-memoir "People Who Led to My Plays" (1987), can be disrupted, too. In Los Angeles, Lewis talked to me about the sexual abuse she had suffered as a child: "I came out to my mother about my [maternal] grandfather's pedophilia against me from my dorm at Hampshire, and my mother said, 'That never happened,' and then, 'Guess what I bought at Saks?' She was in shock, I discovered later. She'd hoped I didn't remember. I began to ask questions about several incidents—and that destroyed her. I didn't tell my father what had happened until after my grandfather died—because I was raised by men who believed in honor and retribution, and I didn't want my father or brothers or uncles to go to jail. But the gift of all this is that both my parents embraced me then, and their honesty and rage and sorrow and company reduced the impact that my grandfather's mental illness had on my life." Part of the strength of Lewis's new book is that little is explicitly described; you won't get any standard revelations here. Lewis tells stories through metaphor and the language of longing. Her urge is to reach out to the dead, to revitalize them, to make history notice them. Abuse is embedded in the danger and the power of the words. (Lewis's grandfather appears in several images.)

Lewis is fierce in her advocacy for her parents, both of whom are now dead. "I idolized my father," she told me. "It was hard for me to accept that he was just a man. He was a fantastic man." Lewis's father was, she told me, "a closet mathematician." Unfortunately, his parents could afford to send only one child to college—his older brother, who became a pediatrician. After serving in the Second World War, Lewis's father worked as a janitor, and then as a forklift operator, for decades. Dreams don't die. They live on in your children, or in family lore, until they become questions—Why didn't Dad do this? Why did Mom do that?—that amount to a kind of haunting.

For Lewis, this haunting extends beyond her immediate family to the many folks in these photographs who dreamed of being something different in a changed world. Henson, the subject of the longest poem in the book, "The Ark: Self-Portrait as Aphrodite Using Her Dress for a Sail," was reportedly one of the first men to reach the North Pole, in 1909. His ferocious

determination to fulfill his ambitions is mirrored by Lewis's; the two are linked by parallel desires to be free, an impulse that makes them family. At first, they are father and daughter, and then, because Lewis is the writer and has the last word, she becomes the parent of the story, she and all her Black female ancestors at once, a kind of buoy riding and never sinking on the sea. Saying adieu to Henson, to that part of history, before returning to her family photographs, Lewis writes:

> And here I am—still—at home,
> bobbing on top of this endless white sea, batting my lashes
>
> toward every beacon—on any remaining shore—ignited
> and burning brightly throughout all the black worlds.

Lewis carries Henson's dream—and the dreams of all the family members she knew or didn't know—into the world of her imagination, which also begins with a dream. She writes in "The Ark":

> When no one is speaking French, I hear people speaking
> French. When no one's speaking Spanish, I hear someone
> call out to me in Spanish. In my sleep I hear languages
> I have never heard. And answer back.

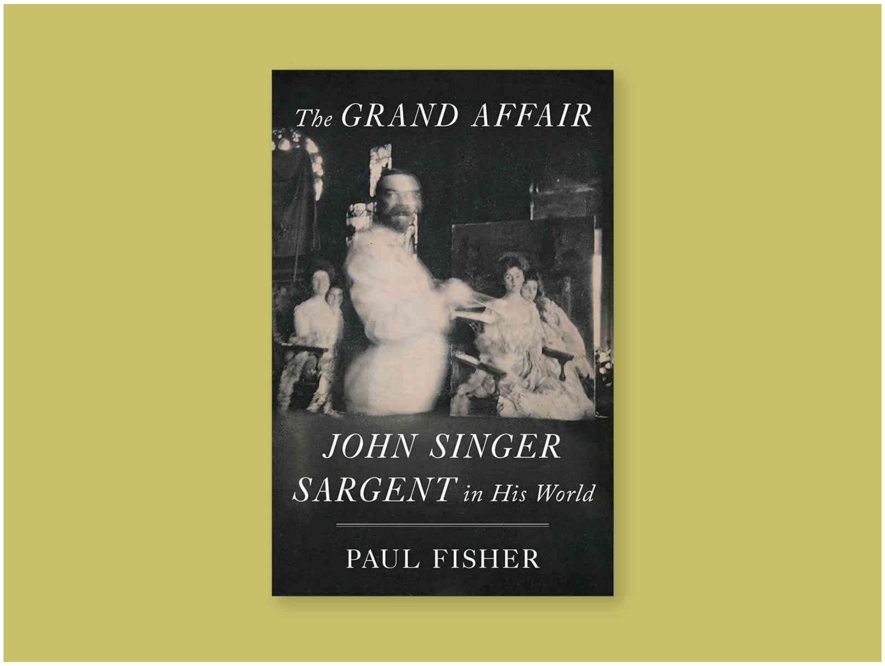
What is writing but listening for what you've never heard before? And exploring—sometimes in words, sometimes in words and images—the hitherto unknown regions of your mind and, God willing, the minds of all the people who made you? ♦

By Janet Malcolm

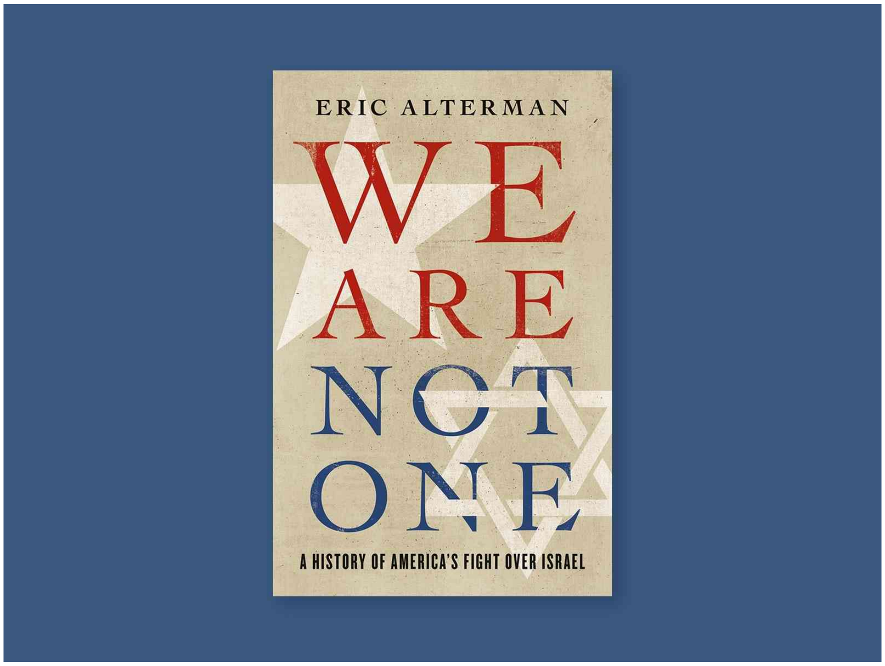
By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch



The Grand Affair, *by Paul Fisher (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. As one of the premier portraitists of the Belle Époque, John Singer Sargent lived a life befitting his status: garnering praise at the Paris Salon, painting such figures as Isabella Stewart Gardner and Teddy Roosevelt, and socializing with luminaries like Henry James and Oscar Wilde. But, as this sensitive biography makes clear, Sargent also pursued less socially acceptable interests; he had an abiding fascination with the male nude and was involved in intimate, somewhat ambiguous relationships with same-sex friends and models. Fisher wisely avoids making sweeping claims about Sargent's sexuality, choosing instead to examine how "the protected and sanctioned camaraderie of the studio" enabled the painter's art and social life to take on quietly unconventional forms.

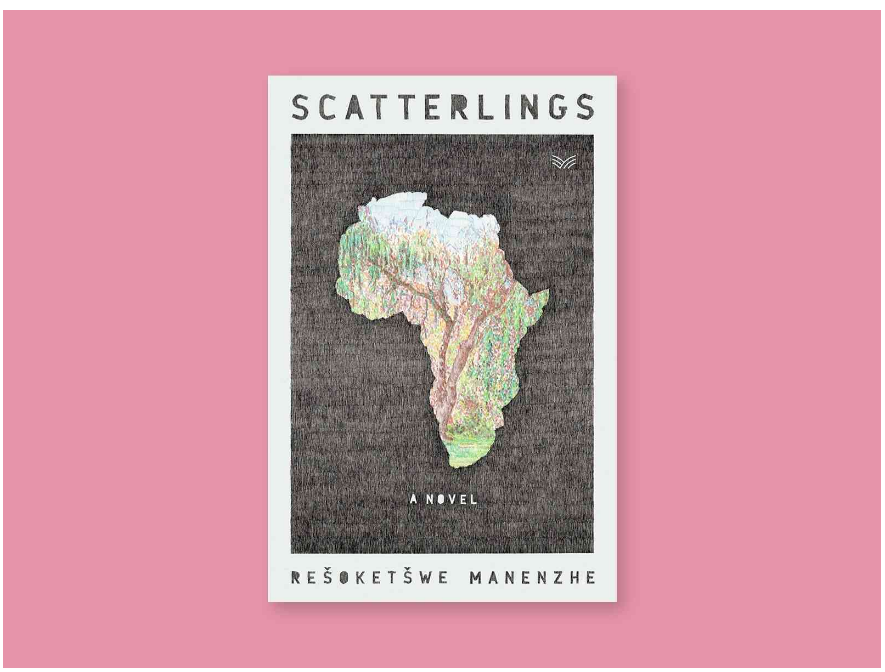


We Are Not One, *by Eric Alterman (Basic)*. In this fearless account, Alterman, a journalist and a historian, sets out to describe the complex relationship between Israel and the U.S., at a moment when the former, having just elected the most conservative government in its history, is a distinctly red state, while, in the latter, Jews make up one of the bluest constituencies. He provides a scrupulous history of the crucial debates over Zionism, anti-Zionism, Palestine, the role of memory and the Holocaust, and America's interactions with Israel. Alterman's aim is not to flatter readers, no matter their ideological camp, but, rather, to scrutinize mythologies and fairy tales in order to make greater sense of why Israeli and American Jews, particularly in non-Orthodox communities, appear to be drifting farther apart.

The Best Books of 2022

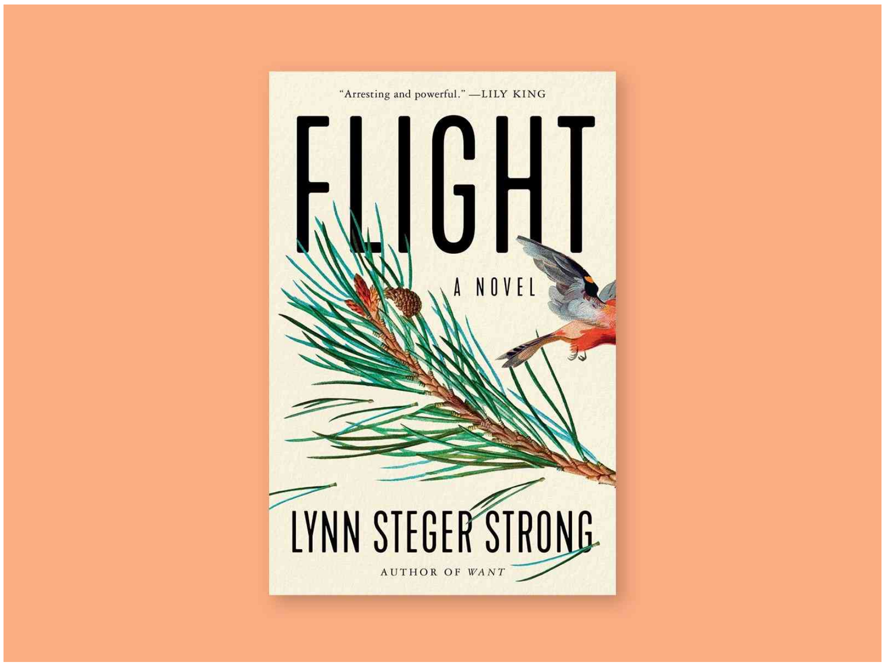


Read our reviews of the year's notable new fiction and nonfiction.



Scatterlings, *by Rešoketšwe Manenzhe (HarperVia)*. Set in South Africa in 1927, this powerful novel chronicles the unravelling of a biracial family in the wake of the Immorality Act, which outlawed sexual relations between white and Black people. A winemaker of Dutch and English heritage; his

wife, who was born to formerly enslaved parents in Jamaica; and their two daughters are "tumbled into chaos" by the new law. In despair, the mother makes a decision that costs two family members their lives; the surviving pair flee the country. Manenzhe situates this tragic tale within the broader context of the displacement and abuse of Africans caused by colonialism and the slave trade, but her achievement is to humanize the victims of that legacy, in a story that feels like an act of restoration.



Flight, *by Lynn Steger Strong (Mariner)*. In this compact, minutely observed novel, the fate of a house in Florida—in which the three adult children of a recently deceased woman were raised—becomes the subject of delicate debate. Taking place in the lead-up to the first Christmas after the mother's death, the story centers on her gathered offspring, their spouses, and their own children, employing a roving perspective to tease out each character's response to loss and kinship. One of the sons considers his tribe "a small good gift," whereas his wife is bewildered by the use of the word "family" in a way that "didn't necessarily portend some sort of altercation."

By David Denby

Comic Strip

- **Roz and Emily Eat Their Way Through Midwood**
- **Why I Chose Horses Instead of Babies**
- **Picturing the Cove Inn**

By Shauna Lyon

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By Ian Frazier

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By Philip Gourevitch

By Lisa Hanawalt

By Katy Waldman

By Inkoo Kang

By Hua Hsu

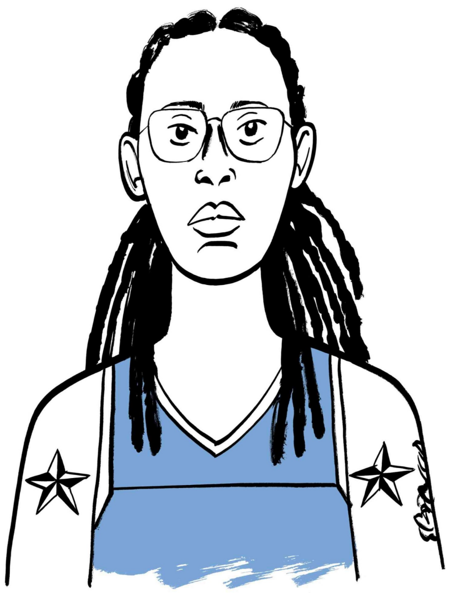
Comment

- **Brittney Griner and the Role of Race in Diplomacy**

Brittney Griner and the Role of Race in Diplomacy

Griner's release recalls the lessons of the effort to free Robert Goodman, an African American Navy navigator, from Syria.

By Jelani Cobb



Thirty-nine years ago this month, an African American Navy bombardier-navigator named Robert Goodman was taking part in a mission to destroy Syrian munitions in Lebanon when his plane was shot down. The pilot, Mark Lange, died, and Goodman, who was twenty-seven, suffered fractured ribs and other injuries. Syrian soldiers found him and took him to a military compound in Damascus. His capture immediately provoked a complex international standoff. The Syrian government viewed him as a prisoner of war and said that he would not be released until the United States withdrew its forces from Lebanon. (Hundreds of Americans were stationed there, as part of a multinational force deployed to stabilize the region.) The incident presented a dilemma for the Reagan Administration, which had come to power in part by attacking President Jimmy Carter's failed efforts to release fifty-two American hostages held in Iran. The White House's inability to negotiate Goodman's release also fostered an impression that Ronald

Reagan, who had a long record of antipathy toward civil-rights causes, was unconcerned about a Black P.O.W. As the civil-rights leader Jesse Jackson saw it, according to his biographer, Marshall Frady, Reagan's policy was in effect "just to leave Goodman there to rot."

Later that December, in an effort to secure Goodman's freedom, Jackson himself left for Syria with a sprawling retinue that included his personal physician, a number of reporters, and the Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan. After three days of negotiations, the Syrian President, Hafez al-Assad, agreed to release Goodman, as an act of good will. But, despite that triumph, Frady wrote, Jackson returned home to a cascade of criticism. Reagan invited Goodman, Jackson, and their families to the White House, but an Administration official reportedly said that Assad had released Goodman to Jackson mostly to embarrass Reagan—a possibility that likely did not escape Jackson, who made his first Presidential run the next year.

The Goodman case highlights both the potential of citizen diplomacy and the complications that race can impose on foreign relations. The latter issue came to the fore again on December 8th, when Brittney Griner, an American basketball player and two-time Olympic gold medallist, who had been held in Russian custody for nearly ten months, on drug-possession charges, walked across an airport tarmac in Abu Dhabi, as part of an exchange that also freed Viktor Bout, a notorious Russian arms dealer serving a twenty-five-year prison sentence in the United States. As with Goodman's case, some activists had feared that, in the midst of a foreign conflict, Griner's identity—she is Black and queer—would make her a low priority for U.S. diplomatic efforts. The circumstances, of course, are very different: many African Americans viewed Reagan with suspicion, whereas support from Black voters was key to Joe Biden's election. But LaTosha Brown, a founder of Black Voters Matter, a group that has been key to recent Democratic victories in Georgia, echoed Jackson when she told NBC News that, absent efforts to keep Griner's name in the news, she might "rot in jail." And, as with the Goodman case, Griner's release inspired a tide of criticism—from Republicans, at least.

Donald Trump, Jr., denounced Griner as "awful" and "America hating"—an apparent reference to the fact that in 2020, following the deaths of several African Americans at the hands of police, Griner, like many other athletes,

had protested the playing of the national anthem at games. Trump, Sr., who later said that his Administration had refused to swap Bout to secure the release of Paul Whelan—a former marine who, since 2018, has been held in a Russian prison on espionage charges, which he denies—called the deal "a stupid and unpatriotic embarrassment." Representative Kevin McCarthy, of California, who has been struggling to wrangle his colleagues' votes to become the Speaker of the House, dismissed Biden's deal as "a gift to Vladimir Putin."

The main theme of the Republican criticism was a supposed weakness in releasing an international war criminal to bring Griner home. Making this argument required a profound tolerance for hypocrisy, given that those huffing about the necessity of keeping an arms dealer in prison belong to a party that has made access to firearms so obscenely sacrosanct that guns have become the leading cause of death for American children. Yet there was an obvious asymmetry in the scene in Abu Dhabi, as the thirty-two-year-old Olympian ambled past the fifty-five-year-old arms trafficker. They had both been convicted of violating laws, but only one of those convictions had a body count attached to it.

By comparison, the U.S. brokered a deal with Russia in April that freed Trevor Reed, a former marine serving nine years on charges of endangering a Russian police officer during an altercation—charges he denied—in exchange for Konstantin Yaroshenko, a Russian pilot serving twenty years on charges related to attempts to smuggle cocaine into the U.S. Those offenses were not equivalent (the Biden team was acting in part on reports of Reed's declining health), but the deal was not nearly as lopsided as trading a man known as the Merchant of Death for a basketball player who said that she had unintentionally carried a vape cartridge with hash oil in her luggage.

So the exchange was a victory for Griner, her family, and her supporters, but also, to a significant degree, for Putin, who, amid his blunders in Ukraine, can placate his nationalist critics by proclaiming that he played hardball with the U.S. During a press conference after Griner's release, the White House press secretary, Karine Jean-Pierre, confirmed the Russian intransigence, saying that American negotiators had not been able to secure the release of Whelan because "the choice became to either bring Brittney home or no one." Putin, having been shaped by a Cold War-era K.G.B. that specialized

in manipulating U.S. racial tensions, was almost certainly aware that a perception that Griner might receive insufficient attention could be used to his advantage. The activism that resulted from that perception no doubt helped push the Biden Administration to make a deal rather than to risk repeating the miscalculations of the Reagan Administration.

Still, the Griner affair may yet reiterate a crucial lesson of December, 1983—that inequality, or even the appearance of inequality, is not only a liability at home but an impediment in foreign affairs. The irony is that Putin, in the most cynical way possible, has demonstrated that Black lives really do matter, by highlighting just how much you can achieve by placing one in jeopardy. ♦

By Keith Gessen

By Jia Tolentino

By Rebecca Mead

By Jelani Cobb

Cryptic Crossword

- The Cryptic Crossword: Sunday, December 18, 2022

Dept. of Fatty Meats

- **Two Comedians Walk Into a Deli**

Two Comedians Walk Into a Deli

Katz's Delicatessen, the home of "I'll have what she's having," agreed to let a couple of twenty-four-year-olds stage a standup show among the pastrami and the Cel-Ray soda.

By [Michael Schulman]



A lot of funny things have happened at Katz's Delicatessen since it opened, in 1888—most famously, the "I'll have what she's having" scene in "When Harry Met Sally." But, until last month, the Lower East Side shrine to pastrami had not hosted a comedy show. The milestone came courtesy of David Levine and Ethan Mansoor, two twenty-four-year-olds who are determined to produce standup comedy in inhospitable environments, akin to planting tulip bulbs in the Sahara. In the past twenty months, they've put on pop-up shows in a laundromat, a flower shop, and a tattoo parlor. But Katz's, they said recently, was their Madison Square Garden.

"We asked everybody, 'Has there ever been a comedy show here before?' " Levine said, over a corned-beef sandwich at Katz's, the day before the big event. He and Mansoor, both native Manhattanites, met at a chess tournament in kindergarten. Levine got into comedy his senior year of high school; Mansoor went into finance. Early last year, with comedy clubs

closed because of the pandemic, Mansoor saw a socially distanced set in a hotel lobby and realized that comics were desperate for gigs. Levine knew a trainer who was about to open his own gym right before the shutdown. "I said to him, 'Hey, before you put equipment in there, can we do a grand opening?' " Levine recalled. They borrowed folding chairs and held their first show for some thirty people.

Not long afterward, Mansoor persuaded the manager of La La Laundry, in Alphabet City, to let them do a show. "It was, like, sixty-five kids. People were sitting on washing machines," he said. "We were wearing robes and pajamas, like it was laundry day." Calling themselves Underground Overground, they charmed their way into a music studio in Chelsea, a hair salon in NoHo. They spread the word through Instagram and amassed an eleven-thousand-person waiting list. "I would reach out to TikTok-ers, comp them two seats," Levine said. There were logistical hurdles. A mochi store was so cramped that people had to climb over chairs to get to their own. At a leather shop on Orchard Street, they worried about beer getting spilled on expensive coats, but the problem wound up being a door guy who got blackout drunk. At Economy Candy, they cleared away heavy metal racks to squeeze in fifty-five spectators. "The comedians performed right in front of the jelly beans," Mansoor said.

After the leather-shop show, the duo celebrated at Katz's and started dreaming big. The meat slicers directed them to the head of catering, who eventually led them to David Manheim, who handles the deli's strategic partnerships. Katz's had hosted events, such as a cast party for the movie "Uncut Gems," but never standup. "I was, like, They're fucking idiots, but they're passionate," Manheim recalled at lunch. He was joined by Katz's owner, Jake Dell, who inherited the place from his father and grandfather. (He had his bar mitzvah there, in 2000.) "I was a little skeptical at first, I'm not going to lie," Dell said. "But then I met these two knuckleheads, and it all made sense." Katz's has had plenty of comedian regulars (Jackie Mason, Jim Gaffigan), he reasoned. "If this store had an identity, it would be Don Rickles."

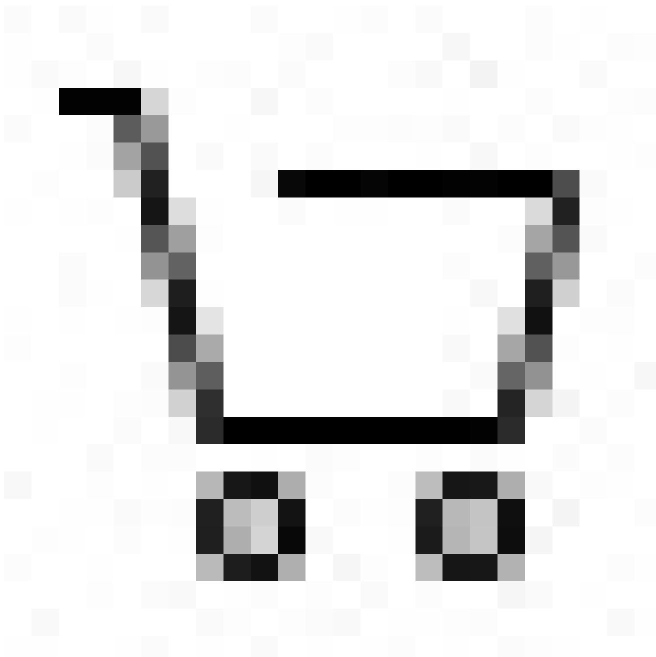


"Mrs. Ritterhouse hit high C and the cat hit the wall."
Cartoon by George Booth

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Shop



The next night, around nine, Mansoor and Levine returned with an army of volunteers. They had an hour to convert the venue, after shooing out the last of the customers. “Someone got very nasty with me—‘I came all the way from Houston to eat here!’ ” Levine said. He was nervous but prepared: “We all did guided meditation tonight.”

After the deli staff mopped the floors, Mansoor and Levine set up sound equipment and arranged the chairs. “Think Spirit Airlines,” Mansoor told a friend who was spacing out the rows. They placed a small, semicircular stage in front of a wall of celebrity-patron photos (Abe Vigoda, Dennis Franz) and set out paper bags of fries at the entrance; the hundred-and-fifty-dollar tickets included drinks and a post-show sandwich. With a restless line outside, Levine gathered the volunteers for shots of tequila. “Let’s bring the energy,” he told them. “I love you all.”

The lineup of seven comics included Dave Attell and the “Daily Show” correspondent Roy Wood, Jr. Chris Turner, a British comedian who does freestyle rap, had performed at a bunch of Underground Overground shows. “You have the frisson of the unexpected,” he said. Just after ten, the producers welcomed the young crowd, which included business owners they had tried to woo. (Mansoor: “The guys from Down Dog yoga are somewhere here!”) One comic, Jessica Kirson, complained onstage, “I got

here, like, fucking twenty minutes ago, and my sandwich hasn't come out." Afterward, everyone lined up for pastrami. Mansoor was elated, having conquered his Madison Square Garden. "Now we gotta be like Billy Joel and keep doing it," he said. "We have our eyes on the Intrepid." ♦

By Ava Kofman

By David Remnick

By Ted Geltner

By Stephania Taladrid

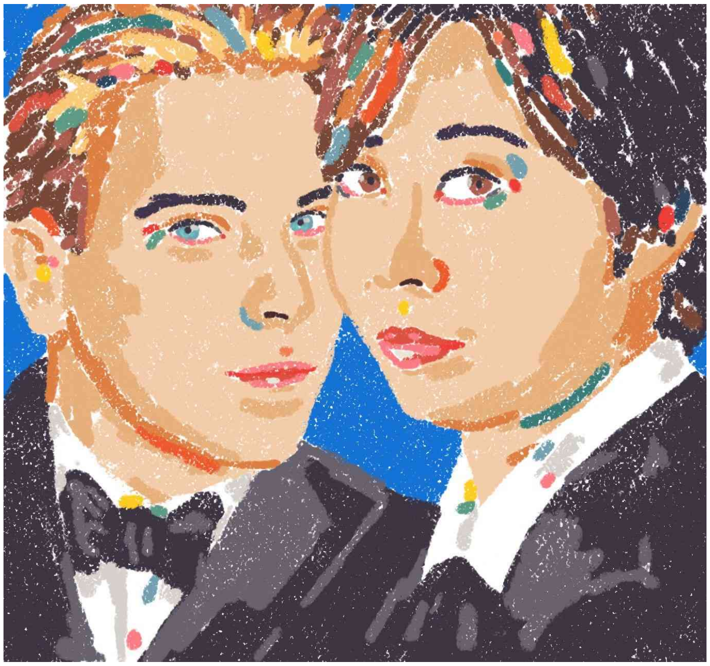
Musical Events

- **Looking Past the Celebrity Conductor**

Looking Past the Celebrity Conductor

Hype is buoying the young phenomenon Klaus Mäkelä, but Xian Zhang, at the New Jersey Symphony, shows a better way forward for the art.

By Alex Ross



Some years ago, when I was interviewing the pianist Mitsuko Uchida, she poked fun at the idea of a youthful star conductor: "Do you want yourself to be operated on by a genius twenty-year-old heart surgeon? Do you want to go to the theatre and see a teen-ager play King Lear?" Uchida's point was that practitioners of the arm-waving profession tend to grow better and wiser with age. Orchestras register not only the gestures a conductor makes in front of them but also the history of music-making that those gestures reflect. Herbert Blomstedt, who is ninety-five, can mesmerize a jaded first-tier ensemble with a gentle wave of his hands. It's more than a question of personal mystique: it's trust in a cumulative record of collective work.

That said, conducting isn't simply an old person's game. Willem Mengelberg, a major figure in early-twentieth-century music, assumed control of the Concertgebouw Orchestra, in Amsterdam, when he was twenty-four. Zubin Mehta and Gustavo Dudamel both took the helm of the L.A. Philharmonic when they were in their twenties. The City of

Birmingham Symphony helped launch the careers of Simon Rattle, Andris Nelsons, and Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla. Now comes Klaus Mäkelä, a twenty-six-year-old Finn who has shot to podium fame as precipitately as anyone in history. He leads the Oslo Philharmonic and the Orchestre de Paris, will become chief conductor of the Concertgebouw in 2027, and is being eyed by several American orchestras. He made his New York Philharmonic début in early December.

With high cheekbones and sleekly styled hair, Mäkelä looks the part of the dashing European maestro, particularly if you are seeking a Generation Z reboot of Herbert von Karajan. Perhaps with that resemblance in mind, the Decca label signed Mäkelä and, earlier this year, released his first recording: an entire cycle of the Sibelius symphonies, with the Oslo Philharmonic. The idea that someone in his mid-twenties could have mastered these complex and elusive scores is improbable on its face, and Mäkelä, for all his obvious talent, shows his immaturity on nearly every page.

Take the Sibelius Fifth—a marvel of continuous transformation in which colossal themes gestate from atmospheric textures. Mäkelä has an excellent ear for sonority, especially in the string section. (He started out as a cellist.) All manner of fascinating details emerge: for example, regimented bumblebee activity underpinning the desolate bassoon solo in the first movement. Yet clarity often comes at the price of momentum. More than a few passages sound like those moments in rehearsal when a conductor asks players to slow down so that nuances can be checked. The movement never accelerates into full, thundering flight. Throughout the symphony, there is too much string legato, too little terracing of dynamics, and an awkward grasp of structural transitions. The same critique can be levelled at most of the rest of the cycle, with the notable exception of the Fourth Symphony, which makes a virtue of lugubrious stasis.

I suspect that in later years Mäkelä will be embarrassed by this premature début. Anyone of his age would have gone similarly astray; most conductors make their mistakes outside the international glare. Karajan, for one, spent many years in the German cities of Ulm and Aachen before moving on to Berlin. Only after repeated efforts can a conductor discover which choices capture the attention of audiences and which ones bore them. Let’s hope that Mäkelä can ignore the oddly cultish aura that surrounds him and learn from

his inevitable wrong turns. Otherwise, he will fade into the ranks of photogenic prodigies past.

Mäkelä has one substantial gift: he seems to win the respect of almost every orchestra he works with. The New York Philharmonic, which has a history of disdaining hot-shot young conductors, proved to be no exception. From the start, I had the impression that the players liked the slender Finn and were responding to him alertly. Seldom in recent years have the strings sounded as warm and rich as they did under Mäkelä, who, despite a fair amount of calisthenics on the podium, gives a crisp beat.

At the Friday-morning matinée, Mäkelä achieved mixed results. Jimmy López Bellido's "Perú Negro," a tone poem based on Afro-Peruvian traditions, was vivid but monochromatic. Shostakovich's Sixth Symphony, with its tragic opening movement and two ironic scherzos, exhibited some of the same issues that mar Mäkelä's Sibelius: atmosphere swallowed up momentum, and the finale fell short of the required hysteria. Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique," though, received a performance of exceptional cohesion, with organically flowing tempos and finely controlled balances. (The Philharmonic seems to be compensating well for the acoustic shortcomings that have troubled Geffen Hall since its renovation.) Even if high passion was lacking, the reading had considerable impact, above all in the great lamenting Adagio.

Mäkelä made an unfortunate choice in the "Pathétique." After the bombastic coda of the third movement, which all but begs for applause, he plunged straight into the Adagio, with the result that the first couple of bars were drowned out by audience noise. The custom of remaining silent during pauses between movements took hold only after Tchaikovsky's death; the composer would have expected clapping after the third movement, and, I've always felt, planned to dispel that jubilation with the sobbing first bars of the Adagio. If he had wanted no pause, he would have indicated as much. Mäkelä is hardly the only conductor who attempts an irritating form of crowd control at this moment; he should discard the pretension and trust in the music.

In November, the New Jersey Symphony celebrated its centennial with a gala concert at Prudential Hall, at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, in

Newark—a venue that opened in 1997 and immediately proved superior to Avery Fisher Hall, as Geffen was then known. The New Jersey Symphony dwells in the shadow of the New York Philharmonic, but it has long displayed an adventurous, progressive spirit. The conductor Henry Lewis, who was based there from 1968 to 1976, was the first Black music director at a major American orchestra. The ensemble is now led by Xian Zhang, a forty-nine-year-old Chinese-born conductor who first won wide notice when she held an associate position at the Philharmonic, in the Lorin Maazel era.

Diminutive but dynamic, Zhang is an immaculate podium technician who incites playing of uncommon vitality. Last season, at the L.A. Phil, she facilitated the most flat-out electrifying account of Beethoven's Seventh I've ever heard. At the Newark gala, she elicited an exuberantly violent version of Ginastera's Four Dances from "Estancia," with members of the New Jersey Ballet performing in tandem. Zhang is also a strong proponent of contemporary scores, emphasizing those of nonwhite and female composers. Perhaps most important, she is an empathetic musician who mediates among the players more than she dictates to them. The main attraction of the gala was Yo-Yo Ma, who delivered Dvořák's Cello Concerto with his usual authority and spontaneity. Zhang not only followed Ma's freewheeling, ruminative approach but also internalized it, so that there was no evident tension between orchestra and soloist.

Although Mäkelä garners more publicity, Zhang strikes me as the likelier future of the art. We don't need more itinerant maestros who draw big salaries in multiple cities, carrying their putative genius in their hand luggage. We need more directorships along the lines of Marin Alsop's, at the Baltimore Symphony, or Osmo Vänskä's, at the Minnesota Orchestra—ones in which a conductor focusses on a single city and puts down roots. This is how American orchestral culture unfolded before jet travel. George Szell, during his storied tenure with the Cleveland Orchestra, conducted up to three-quarters of its concerts in a given season. The culture of lyrical perfection that he fostered remains his monument. ♦

By Alex Ross

By Richard Brody

By Alex Ross

By Richard Brody

Poems

- **“Soul Making”**
- **“Greetings, Friends!”**

By Robert Pinsky

Audio: *Read by the author.*

Galactic broth visible light-years away
Brews the first suns. Familial, I feel
I know these lights. I see their pre-biotic
Geometries of purpose the way I impose

Human, nearly literary intentions
Onto the microscopic animals, flexing
Bizarre mandibles, that patrol my eyelids
And guts. Brothers and sisters electronically

Revealed, arcane mute dynasties of being:
Darkling I too perform the turns and bits
Of my assigned proportions. Feigning
Rapt comprehension, I know you the way

An infant pretends amazement each time
The mother with a spoon tip searching
Under the jar's rim finds more and yet
More of the strained *Apricots and Apples*:

Infant, the sunflower turns toward her, deep
Egypt of shared attachment and concealment,
Tangy preserved sweetness forging in turn
The courtly generation of—call it a soul.

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

By The New Yorker

By Anthony Lane

By Saïd Sayrafiezadeh

By Adam Nayman

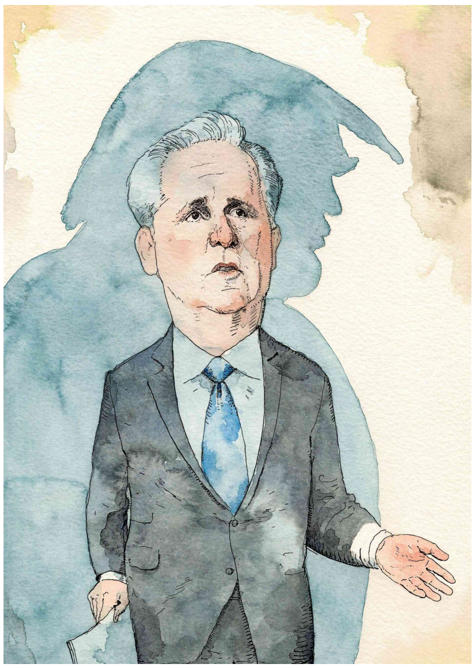
Profiles

- What Kevin McCarthy Will Do to Gain Power

What Kevin McCarthy Will Do to Gain Power

The Republican leader's ambition has always been his defining characteristic. Attempting to placate both Trumpists and moderates may lead to his downfall.

By Jonathan Blitzer



On the afternoon of November 15th, a congressional intern in a suit and tie sprinted down a wing of the Capitol carrying a cardboard box with a slit on the top for paper ballots, then disappeared into an auditorium. Inside, the House Republican conference was electing its new leaders. This was the first of two votes. The second will come on January 3rd, on the floor of the House of Representatives. There still wasn't a clear majority for either party, but it was likely that the Republicans would flip the chamber, and the winner of the voting would become the front-runner for Speaker, second in line for the Presidency. Dozens of journalists sat on the floor outside, preparing for a long afternoon. Two more staffers carrying ballot boxes ran past. "Stop the steal!" a reporter shouted after them.

Four hours later, Kevin McCarthy, a fifty-seven-year-old congressman from Bakersfield, California, emerged with an exaggerated smile. McCarthy, who has more than a decade of service in the G.O.P. leadership, has feathery gray hair and was wearing a tailored navy suit. He had received a hundred and eighty-eight votes, about eighty-five per cent of the conference. “I’m proud to announce the era of one-party Democrat rule in Washington is over,” he said.

For the past two years, his colleagues had been calling McCarthy the “Speaker-in-waiting.” “Nobody knows the inside game better,” Paul Ryan, the previous Republican Speaker, has said. When Kevin Spacey was preparing for the role of Frank Underwood, the Machiavellian schemer on the Netflix show “House of Cards,” he shadowed McCarthy. (McCarthy joked that he agreed to it after learning that Underwood would be a Democrat.) Outgoing and personable, he is intensely social, “a happy warrior,” in the words of his friend the pollster Frank Luntz. Patrick McHenry, a House Republican and a confidant of McCarthy’s, once asked, “If Kevin McCarthy is alone, does he exist?” From the start of his career, in the late nineteen-eighties, as a congressional staffer at a district office in the Central Valley of California, his ambition was to reach the House; once he arrived in Washington, it was to become Speaker. The House is where he’s most himself. He likens spending time there to “having breakfast at a truck stop.”

“Everyone knows the joke,” a former House staffer told me. “All Kevin McCarthy cares about is Kevin McCarthy. He is the man for this moment.” His main strength has always been his malleability. There are no red lines, core policy beliefs, or inviolable principles, just a willingness to adapt to the moods of his conference.

It is perhaps for this reason that no one in the Republican leadership has tied himself to Donald Trump more closely than McCarthy. In 2016, McCarthy supported Trump for President unwaveringly, even when the rest of the Party establishment had doubts. On October 8th, the night before the first Presidential debate, he joined a conference call with prominent Party members. The “Access Hollywood” tape had just leaked, and the Republicans were discussing whether to pull their endorsements. “What the hell are you guys doing?” McCarthy asked, according to an account in “The

Hill to Die On," by Jake Sherman and Anna Palmer. "How can you do this and hurt our nominee?" Soon, he and Trump were speaking multiple times a day. Trump called him "my Kevin."

Two years later, after the Democrats took the House, forcing the Republicans into the minority, McCarthy became the Party's leader, one of its youngest ever. In 2020, though the G.O.P. lost the Presidency and the Senate, House Republicans picked up fourteen seats. Very few Republicans disputed Trump's claims about the election having been stolen; the majority stayed silent. McCarthy went on Fox News to say, "President Trump won this election. . . . We cannot allow this to happen before our eyes." That December, when the Texas attorney general petitioned the Supreme Court to contest the results in four states, McCarthy initially declined to sign an amicus brief in support of the lawsuit, but reversed himself hours after the list of signers went public and Trump got angry; McCarthy cited a "technical glitch." On the night of January 6, 2021, after the insurrection at the Capitol, he voted against certifying the election. A week later, he voted against impeachment. "I'll take this to the grave—Kevin McCarthy is responsible for the rise of Donald Trump again," Adam Kinzinger, the outgoing Republican congressman from Illinois, told me. "He was so close to being dead."

A President's party typically suffers midterm losses in Congress; this year, the combined effect of high inflation and low approval ratings for Joe Biden led strategists to believe that Republicans could gain a twenty- to thirty-seat advantage in the House. "I look at Democrat incumbents right now," McCarthy told Punchbowl News, in October. "I think they're in denial." On Election Night, however, McCarthy was forced to delay his appearance at a victory party in Washington, emerging at two in the morning to speak to a sparse crowd.

An election that was supposed to be about Biden had turned into a referendum on Trump and G.O.P. extremism. "Kevin and Trump, they're not going to be separated by much," Fred Upton, the retiring Michigan congressman and one of ten Republicans in the House who voted to impeach Trump in January, 2021, told me. "Like it or not, Trump's the face of our party right now. He's still very angry."

The Speaker's race is McCarthy's to lose, and yet he could lose it still. During the first round of voting, McCarthy's only official competitor was Andy Biggs, a legislator from Arizona, who received thirty-one votes but who vowed to fight on. Biggs is part of a far-right faction called the Freedom Caucus. The group, which has about forty members, has been a wrecking ball since its creation, in 2015, when it forced out John Boehner as Speaker and sabotaged McCarthy, who was running to replace him. Two years earlier, congresspeople who became core members of the Freedom Caucus had shut down the government and tried to force a federal default, in order to make a point about excessive federal spending. Its ranks have grown with election deniers, QAnon conspiracists, and diehard Trumpists. Sarah Longwell, a Republican strategist, told me, "The Dems' extreme people are extreme on progressive policies. The Republicans' extreme are extreme on the level of the insane taking over the asylum."

When the full election returns started to come in, later in November, the Party looked to have a razor-thin majority—five votes. Five outer-fringe Republicans immediately said that they'd block McCarthy from becoming Speaker. The Freedom Caucus wants McCarthy to make changes to House procedure that will allow them to obstruct future legislation. Even if McCarthy concedes, members of the Freedom Caucus profit from attacking him: the far right is no longer beholden to the Party for money, since it raises its own online by going nuclear. All of them represent increasingly conservative districts where their constituents don't want them to compromise. Although McCarthy has done more than any other top Republican to accommodate Trumpism, he is still the establishment. "The thin ice that he's been on is even thinner than he thought," Norman Ornstein, of the American Enterprise Institute, told me. "When your margin is small, the problem is you're held hostage."

In front of the cameras last month in the Capitol, McCarthy put on a brave face. "We got to listen to everyone in our conference," he said. "I respect each and every one. I respect them equally." He continued, "One thing I've always learned—they don't hand gavels out in small, medium, and large."

A few minutes later, the size of McCarthy's gavel was on display, whether he accepted it or not. Marjorie Taylor Greene—the Georgia congresswoman, QAnon true believer, and fanatical Trump acolyte—stepped up to the

microphones in tan heels and a black flared coat. Last year, after journalists uncovered a string of racist and anti-Semitic comments that Greene had made, the House stripped her of her committee assignments. (Among other things, she suggested that California wildfires were ignited by a space laser fired by the Rothschilds, the Jewish banking family.) McCarthy responded by threatening Democrats that he'd come after them once Republicans retook the majority. After Democrats sanctioned Paul Gosar, of Arizona, for tweeting a video depicting him killing the New York congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, McCarthy said he'd give Gosar and Greene "better" committee assignments.



"Can Billy come outside and break some bones with us?"
Cartoon by Drew Panckeri

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The antic cast of the Republican Party makes it easy to overlook just how flexibly McCarthy negotiates and renegotiates his position. Trent Lott, the former Mississippi senator, who held top Party jobs in both chambers of Congress, used to say that he led “by being led.” McCarthy has made an art

of this mantra; in a world of professional survivors, he has a special talent for staying alive. “I think he’s underestimated,” Eric Cantor, the former Republican House Majority Leader, told me. Along with Paul Ryan and McCarthy, Cantor was a member of a photogenic triumvirate of conservative ideologues known as the Young Guns, who, in 2010, were meant to represent a new generation in Congress. Cantor aligned himself with the insurgent members of the Party, frequently at the expense of his boss, John Boehner. Still, Cantor lost a primary in the spring of 2014, to a candidate from the Tea Party. Four years later, Ryan was gone, too, a casualty of Trumpism. “Think about the transformation and what has occurred in the time that he’s been in Congress,” Cantor said, of McCarthy. “Any kind of criticism of him falls short in terms of recognizing the ability to keep standing and to keep going and to keep leading in this kind of environment.”

For months, Greene had hinted that she might oppose McCarthy when he ran for Speaker. At the very least, she wanted to extract something in exchange for her support, which McCarthy likely needed if he wanted to win over the Trump wing of the Party. Now she had decided to endorse McCarthy for Speaker. “He is listening to all of our voices,” she told the assembled press. Many of her talking points were identical to his, down to the phrases he’d used.

As Greene finished, she said, “We have to have the gavel, because the gavel means subpoena power.” G.O.P. hard-liners are pushing for two years of revanchism to set the stage for 2024: unrelenting investigations into the Biden family, inquiries into Cabinet members, threats of impeachment. These actions will probably play poorly with voters. McCarthy knows it. Yet he now has a Speaker’s race to win, and a small and fractious majority to hold together. “You’re not there because people see you as a tough guy or because they see you as a strategist or as brilliant,” Ornstein told me. Many of McCarthy’s members “are happy to have a Speaker who’s this weak.”

I followed Greene after her speech and asked what McCarthy had promised her. We were walking briskly in the direction of the House floor. Her press aide was filming our exchange with his phone. “I’m looking forward to serving on the Oversight Committee,” she said, naming a House committee likely to lead congressional investigations into the Biden Administration. “That’ll start in January.”

McCarthy was one of three children born to modest, middle-class Bakersfield Democrats. His mother was a homemaker and his father was an assistant fire chief, whose job in the public sector offered generous health insurance. Kevin's brother had glaucoma and needed multiple operations before he turned two. Until the fifth grade, Kevin suffered from a speech impairment that required therapy.

Bakersfield is an oil and agriculture town, one of the reddest parts of the state; its flat, desiccated landscape, just west of the Sierra Nevada, more closely resembles that of the Oklahoma plains or the scrublands of West Texas than the rest of California. As a teen-ager, McCarthy was affable and athletic. At Bakersfield High School, he played tight end for the football team, the Drillers.

His political awareness began after he graduated, when he won five thousand dollars in a state lottery. It was 1984, the height of the Reagan era. McCarthy had been enrolled in community college in Bakersfield, but he dropped out, investing part of his winnings in the stock market and using the rest to open a deli he called Kevin O's. Later, he said that the experience showed him "what all small businesspeople learn: that the work is hard, the margins are thin, and the government is too often an obstacle, not an aid, to success." When he sold the business, some two years later, he used his earnings to pay for college and business school at Cal State Bakersfield, where he joined the California Young Republicans, eventually becoming the organization's chairman.

"Walking through campus, he was always chitchatting with people," Susie Aspeitia, a friend who met him in a marketing class, told me. "His personality was so inviting. Everyone knew him. And, if you didn't, before you knew it you knew him." Aspeitia, whose family is Mexican American, had grown up surrounded by Democrats but considered herself largely apolitical. McCarthy, who was dating his high-school girlfriend and future wife, Judy, brought Aspeitia and her boyfriend into the Young Republicans. "He was right there with all of us, cleaning up glasses and dishes after events," she said. "He was the president, but it didn't feel like we were in a big political group."

It was inevitable that someone like McCarthy would find his way to the office of Representative Bill Thomas, a former political-science professor at Bakersfield College and a Republican, who entered the U.S. House in 1979. Bright and acerbic, Thomas was a dealmaker and a pragmatist with a reputation for having more enemies than friends. But he was regarded as a serious legislator in Washington, where he later became the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee and mentored Paul Ryan, Eric Cantor, and Devin Nunes, who headed the House Intelligence Committee before leaving Congress to work for Trump.

In California, where moderates and conservatives were battling for Party primacy throughout the nineties, Thomas's office was an influential hub. "The fight was usually over guns, babies, and taxes," Ray Haynes, a former Republican assemblyman and state senator, told me. "Thomas tended to take the more moderate side." His chief of staff, Cathy Abernathy, turned McCarthy down when he applied for a position in Washington, in 1987, but she gave him a chance as an unpaid intern in the district office. He was twenty-two. Within three months, she told me, "I had to hire an intern to be his intern."

In October, Abernathy and I met for French toast at Pappy's, a diner in Bakersfield with an oil theme—hard hats, gas pumps, miniature rigs. On the wall behind her, photographs of George W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, and John Wayne hung beside an antique rifle and the mounted head of a buffalo. When McCarthy worked for Thomas, his district extended from east of Bakersfield to San Luis Obispo, near the coast. McCarthy's job, Abernathy said, "was working the district": attending meetings as Thomas's emissary at local clubs, fixing problems, helping constituents. "He genuinely likes people. People like him," Abernathy said. "He wants to be your friend. If there's friction, he tries to smooth it out."

McCarthy worked for Thomas for fifteen years. During that time, he climbed the ranks of the national Young Republicans, becoming the chairman in 1999. "He was someone with that boardroom presence," Mike Madrid, who served as the political director of the California Republican Party in the late nineties, told me. "He'd walk into a meeting and the conversation would stop. He spoke for Bill Thomas. Everyone respected him."

California was in the midst of a political realignment. In 1994, Pete Wilson, the Republican governor, was trailing his Democratic challenger by double digits when he embraced an anti-immigrant ballot measure called Proposition 187, which barred undocumented immigrants from using certain public services. The state was rapidly diversifying, and, though the passage of the proposition paid off in the short term by capitalizing on white anxiety (Wilson won reëlection), it contributed to a long Republican decline. "The California Republican Party is as conservative and white and rural as any party in the country," Madrid said. "It's seventy per cent white in a state that is thirty-five per cent white, not counting Hispanics." Thomas and McCarthy were "fierce advocates for moderating the Party" and "making it more inclusive" in order to win. "They revelled in fighting with conservatives," he said. "They knew California was not Bakersfield."

With Thomas's endorsement, McCarthy ran for the state assembly in 2002, and, when he won, his warm, conciliatory style endeared him to his new colleagues, including conservatives who distrusted his former boss. Dick Ackerman, a veteran state senator and assemblyman, took him aside to offer some friendly advice. "Kevin was using 'Bill' every other word," he said. "I told him, Kevin, half the people here hate Bill Thomas. I wouldn't use that to sell yourself."

In Sacramento, a few weeks after the election, there was an orientation for incoming members of congress. It was held at a hotel and lasted a few days. One evening, a Democrat named Fabian Núñez, who'd just been elected to a district representing Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley, went to the bar with McCarthy. "We didn't know each other until we got elected, but we hit it off right away," Núñez told me. "Kevin says to me, 'I think I'm going to be Republican leader and you're going to be Democratic leader.' I asked him what made him think that. He said, 'Look, people gravitate toward us. People look up to us.' There was no arrogance to it. It was just an observation of someone with a real political lens."

About a year later, McCarthy ran for leader of his party in the assembly, against Ray Haynes, who was older, more experienced, and more conservative. When Haynes tried to strike a deal with McCarthy, offering to alternate in the job, McCarthy replied, "No, let's just fight." There were thirty-two members, nineteen conservatives and thirteen moderates; to win,

McCarthy needed four conservatives. “He knew how to deal with them,” Haynes said. Once Haynes realized that McCarthy had their votes, he withdrew his candidacy. “I was a rival, but not an enemy,” he said.

In an assembly dominated by Democrats, McCarthy faced a bind. Because conservatives outnumbered moderates in the minority, there wasn’t a strong appetite for compromise. Yet the Republicans lacked the power to pass legislation. Jim Brulte, who was the minority leader in the state senate at the time, told me, “When you’re the minority leader in the California State Assembly, you can only lead by sheer force of personality.” McCarthy distributed books (Newt Gingrich on politics), iPods, and watches; he planned Party retreats and organized weekly bipartisan basketball games at a Sacramento gym. He had presents ready for members’ birthdays and their children’s graduations. When Núñez, the Democrat, became the speaker of the assembly, he kept a binder with biographical information on his members. McCarthy paged through it once, while the two were chatting in the state capitol. “I have the same thing,” he told Núñez. “Except I have wedding anniversaries in mine. You don’t.”

Three months before McCarthy took over as the Republican leader of the assembly, the Democratic governor, Gray Davis, who was almost a year into his second term, was recalled. The winner of the vote to replace him was Arnold Schwarzenegger. “All of a sudden, the government changes and all the people Kevin knows are on the executive staff,” Richard Costigan, Schwarzenegger’s secretary of legislative affairs, told me. “The whole field shifted with the recall.” For McCarthy, a moderate Republican governor who happened to be a celebrity was a political lifeline. It helped that McCarthy was telegenic and celebrity-obsessed. Republican members used to rib him for not wearing a hat at softball games because it would mess up his hair. He also had a habit of collecting photos with celebrities on his cell phone. Schwarzenegger kept a nine-pound sword from the movie set of “Conan the Barbarian” in the governor’s office; his staff was too nervous to touch it. But one day McCarthy led some constituents into the office, picked up the sword, and started waving it around. Schwarzenegger walked in on him through a back door. “Conan the Barbarian was standing next to the minority leader,” Costigan said. “People wanted to be around the Governor, and Kevin helped to facilitate that.”

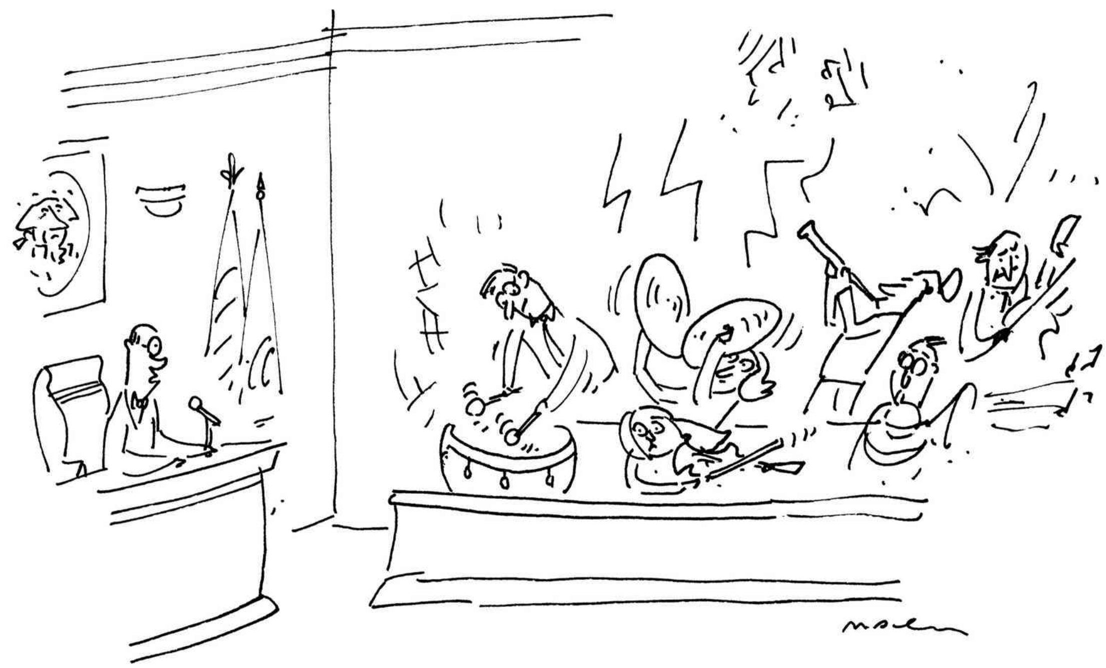
McCarthy served as minority leader in the assembly until 2006, when Bill Thomas announced his retirement from Congress and McCarthy ran for his seat, winning it handily. By then, he'd amassed a record in the assembly of helping pass budgets and securing modest legislative concessions, which the Republicans and the Democrats I spoke to seemed to praise equally, albeit for different reasons. "The Republicans went through leaders like I go through black flat shoes," Susan Kennedy, a Democrat at the time, who served as Schwarzenegger's chief of staff, said. "Kevin was one of the only ones who knew how to find compromise and still win politically. His DNA was tactical." Dick Ackerman said that McCarthy helped "remind Schwarzenegger that he was a Republican."

Bill Thomas, who is eighty-one years old and lives in Bakersfield, is still capable of making news. Last year, a week and a half after the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, Thomas went on a local TV station to blast his longtime protégé as a hypocrite. McCarthy, he said, "built his new credentials as best he could" by parroting Trump's "phony lies" about a stolen election.

Two days before Thomas spoke, McCarthy gave a brief speech on the House floor. "The President bears responsibility for Wednesday's attack on Congress by mob rioters," he said. It was the first and last time McCarthy publicly crossed Trump. On the broadcast, Thomas said he hoped that "the Kevin who spoke during the impeachment, notwithstanding the fact he didn't vote for it, will be the Kevin leading the Republicans on the floor of the House and not the 'my Kevin' " who "had been supporting, nurturing the lies of the President."

On a warm October afternoon in Bakersfield, Thomas picked me up in a red BMW Z3, and we went out for lunch at a fish-and-chips restaurant attached to a bowling alley. A Washington magazine that ranked Congress members by intelligence and temperament routinely gave Thomas high marks for "brainiest," "meanest," and "hottest temper." He was proud of all three. "Meanest?" he said. "The reason was I said no. You have a cockamamie idea, I'm not going to put it up at midnight or at noon. The most popular people have round heels. They'll roll over for anything." When we arrived, he sat with his back to the front door so that we wouldn't get interrupted by people who might recognize him and come over to chat.

"The Kevin McCarthy who is now, at this time, in the House isn't the Kevin McCarthy I worked with. At least from outward appearances. You never know what's inside, really," Thomas said. "Kevin basically is whatever you want him to be. He lies. He'll change the lie if necessary. How can anyone trust his word?" He went on, "At some point, you have to look at where you started and how you got to where you are, and I would ask you, How do you feel about yourself? I know what his answer would be, but it wouldn't be the truth." What would the answer be? I asked. "It was all worth it."



"Has the jury reached a crescendo?"
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

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When McCarthy served in the California assembly, it was common knowledge among state pols that he had national aspirations. “I can’t recall a time when he came into the office to talk about a substantive political issue,” Thomas told me. “The political goal as he moved up the district structure”

was “to build up” relationships. “He’s the guy in the college fraternity that everybody liked and winds up selling life insurance, convincing people they need it.”

At lunch, Thomas preferred talking policy to politics, mostly because he was passionate about the details, but also because it illustrated his conviction about the nature of true influence and longevity in Congress. A terminal of the Bakersfield airport is named for him, as is a large public fund financing ongoing construction of highways and freight corridors in the region. Thomas refers to legislation as “product” and so can sound like a drug dealer when discussing road-improvement programs. In his view, the business of legislating is foreign to McCarthy. “He’s already said, ‘As soon as I become Speaker, I’m going after the Attorney General,’ ” Thomas told me. “Why would you want to spend your whole life trying to be Speaker to go after somebody? What are you *for*?”

Thomas had been willing to use his power not just to pass bills but to settle partisan scores. What struck him now was a tactical dilemma: if everyone in the conference knew that McCarthy would do anything to hold the Speakership, then he’d have no way of enforcing discipline. “Everything is focussed on becoming Speaker,” Thomas said. “What do you do after?” As the Party’s chief congressional fund-raiser, McCarthy could help get members elected. “You can’t hold the money over them anymore,” Thomas went on. “Now you’re in. What have you got that keeps them tied to you?”

On April 15, 2009—Tax Day—McCarthy took John Boehner to a Tea Party rally in Bakersfield, where thousands of anti-government demonstrators had gathered near the town’s full-size replica of the Liberty Bell to protest high taxes and government spending. One of their principal targets was the seven-hundred-and-eighty-seven-billion-dollar federal stimulus bill, passed two months before by a Democrat-controlled Congress, but their rage was broad, bipartisan, and generally anti-establishment. Boehner was seen as the last man standing from the Newt Gingrich era. In 1994, the Republicans had won the House for the first time in forty years, led by Gingrich, the Georgia congressman, who campaigned on a platform he called the Contract with America. Boehner told Republican politicians to go to Tea Party rallies—not to stand up and make speeches, but to listen. He tasked McCarthy with drafting a Pledge to America. Forty-eight pages long, it outlined the

Republicans' top priorities: repealing Obamacare, ending tax increases, and cutting federal spending by a hundred billion dollars.

McCarthy had quickly joined Republican leadership in the House by applying a lesson he'd learned from his years on Thomas's staff: since his was a safe seat, he generated good will by plowing much of his campaign money into other candidates' races across the country. In California, where a Republican governor was comfortable striking deals with Democrats, McCarthy had positioned himself as a more moderate dealmaker. But now, at the national level, the path to power ran through redoubled conservatism and strong opposition to President Obama. On the night of Obama's first Inauguration, a group of influential Republican Party members had met for dinner at a Washington steakhouse to plot the course. "If you act like you're the minority, you're going to stay in the minority," McCarthy said, according to "When the Tea Party Came to Town," by Robert Draper. "We've gotta challenge them on every single bill and challenge them on every single campaign."

For the 2010 election cycle, McCarthy worked with Paul Ryan and Eric Cantor to recruit candidates and to lead the campaign effort. Each was part of the Republican establishment, yet they sold themselves as outsiders with big ideas. After a conservative journalist anointed them the Young Guns, in an article in the *Weekly Standard*, they published a book with the same name; its precepts, which were based on slashing federal spending and rewriting the tax code, became their template for signing up candidates who were motivated by the rising populist tide to enter politics. "Boehner hadn't even been told about the Young Gun manifesto," a senior G.O.P. staffer told me. "They tried to be the three amigos." Ryan was the policy expert, Cantor the political leader, and McCarthy the strategist. "It really was all Kevin," Cantor told me. "He was always, again, playing on his strength of understanding where members are, knowing their families, understanding what their districts were like."

That November, the Republicans retook the House by winning sixty-three additional seats, and conference members chose Boehner as Speaker and Cantor as Majority Leader. McCarthy became the Whip, whose job was to corral votes for Boehner and Cantor. Boehner wanted to lower spending by reaching a grand bargain with President Obama involving tax increases, a

strategy that many Republican freshmen abhorred. Cantor and McCarthy supported the insurgents' position. "There weren't a lot of people back then who wanted us to deal with the White House," Cantor told me.

McCarthy had a compulsion to be liked, and he identified with the freshmen he'd helped recruit. In his office, according to Draper, he put up black-and-white photos of the new congresspeople next to those of senior members. He hosted movie nights and took the congress members on field trips to the office building that housed the Bureau of Public Debt. During an election, he pulled aside Scott DesJarlais, a bald Tennessee physician who ran in 2010, to give him some pointers on his facial hair. "Michael Phelps shaves his entire body to get one-tenth of one second faster," McCarthy told him. "I think that goatee is costing you five per cent of the vote."

While the Republicans remained divided, Congress passed a series of temporary measures to keep the government open. But the tension grew, in large part because McCarthy and Cantor were stoking unrealistic expectations. "Boehner's view was, You're not going to repeal Obamacare. Stop telling the Tea Party people that you can," the G.O.P. staffer said.

McCarthy played both sides. He was protective of the new members, but he had a job to do. In March, 2011, according to reporting by Draper, McCarthy tried to rally the members to compromise by pitching a provisional spending deal as a way for Republicans to keep the pressure on Obama. "When you're coming around a corner and you see your friend in a fight, what do you do?" he said. "First, you jump in and you help beat up the other guy. And then when it's all over you can ask, 'Hey, what was that fight about?' "

The next few years were unstable and rancorous. In an effort to emphasize that Republicans had ideas of their own, Mitt Romney chose Paul Ryan as his running mate in the 2012 Presidential campaign, elevating a hyper-conservative agenda on spending and tax cuts. "We didn't just want to be against what Obama was doing," Cantor told me. "It turns out we were rebuffed." By now, the forces he and McCarthy had indulged in the Republican conference were becoming unmanageable. "I forget how many times they voted on repealing Obamacare, but that was never enough," the staffer lamented. At one point, in December, 2012, Boehner opened a Party meeting by reciting the Serenity Prayer. In October, 2013, the government

shut down for sixteen days, and a large faction of House Republicans refused to raise the debt ceiling, risking a default. To reopen the government, Boehner was eventually forced to find votes among Democrats. After that, it became impossible to regain control of the Party. At a G.O.P. retreat at a hotel in Maryland, in January, 2014, Boehner presented a set of Republican principles. “It didn’t go well,” one attendee told me. “I could see McCarthy staff and Cantor staff celebrating. They were huddled in the corner kind of laughing over the failure.”

The Freedom Caucus emerged at the start of 2015, partly as a consequence of the growing rift between Tea Party members and the House Republican leadership. On July 28th, one of its founders, Mark Meadows, the North Carolina congressman who later became Trump’s White House chief of staff, walked onto the House floor and filed a motion to “vacate the chair,” initiating a vote to oust Boehner as Speaker. After Boehner stepped down, the vote to replace him, which took place in October, was supposed to be pro forma and uneventful. With Cantor no longer in the House, McCarthy was the obvious front-runner.

Republican members had already gathered to vote when McCarthy appeared with his wife and family and announced that he was withdrawing from consideration. “The meeting was immediately adjourned,” Carlos Curbelo, a former two-term Republican congressman from Florida, told me. “Everyone was shocked. No one saw it coming.” Speculation about what the precipitating event might have been persists to this day. One explanation was that McCarthy had committed a significant gaffe in an interview with Sean Hannity, in September, when he suggested that the House’s special committee on Benghazi was trying to sink Hillary Clinton. This was common knowledge, but in Washington you weren’t supposed to say it out loud. Ultimately, though, it was the Freedom Caucus that blocked him. It opposed anyone from the Party’s existing leadership structure, and McCarthy hadn’t yet consolidated enough support among other members to compensate for the lost votes. “He called Paul Ryan right before the press conference and said, ‘I’m dropping out of the race and endorsing you for Speaker,’ ” a former senior Hill staffer told me. Ryan was in good standing with the Party’s different factions, making him the most viable alternative. “In order for Kevin to stay in his role and stay relevant, it had to be seamless,” according to the staffer. But Ryan, who didn’t want the position

and hadn't yet conferred with his family, was blindsided. It took more than two weeks—and a pressure campaign mounted by Boehner and others—to persuade him to take the job. The staffer told me, "Paul said, 'You cannot do that. You can't put me in that position.' "

On January 6, 2021, when Capitol Police evacuated the House chamber, McCarthy went to his office, accompanied by Bruce Westerman, a Republican congressman from Arkansas. Once the rioters breached the building, security officers took McCarthy to a military base, where he joined Mitch McConnell, Nancy Pelosi, and Chuck Schumer. Westerman, who stayed behind, grabbed a Civil War sword from a display in McCarthy's office and hid in the Minority Leader's private bathroom.

Of the top four leaders in the House and the Senate, McCarthy was the only one on regular speaking terms with Donald Trump. Members were texting McCarthy, begging him to tell the President to call off the rioters. When he reached Trump by phone, the President reportedly said, "Well, Kevin, I guess these people are more upset about the election than you are."

Before the insurrection, McCarthy had told his members that the vote to certify the election would be a "vote of conscience": there wasn't a party-line position, so no one would be punished for how he voted. But this also meant that members were on their own at a time when many of them were receiving death threats from constituents. The only member of the Republican House leadership to take a strong stance against the President's lies was Liz Cheney, of Wyoming. At first, McCarthy refused to clarify his position and wouldn't answer when members asked him for direction. The factions weren't clearly divided along ideological lines. A group of fierce conservatives, including Chip Roy, a congressman from Texas and a member of the Freedom Caucus, thought it was a bad idea to oppose certification. When another congressman asked McCarthy how the leadership saw the vote, he responded sharply, "You want me to give you your voting card?"

On January 3rd, McCarthy made his position clear—and went a step further. According to "Unchecked," by Rachael Bade and Karoun Demirjian, he allowed staffers for Jim Jordan—a former nemesis from the Freedom Caucus, a rabid Trumpist, and a vociferous election denier—to set up a

special area next to the House floor to recruit votes against certification. When House moderates and some of McCarthy's own staff objected, the journalists write, he "dismissed their concerns out of hand." (McCarthy's office denies this.)

In private, McCarthy criticized Trump for inciting the insurrection, according to recordings obtained by the *Times* reporters Jonathan Martin and Alexander Burns. On a conference call with House Republican leaders, on January 8th, McCarthy said, "What the President did is atrocious and totally wrong." Two days later, he said, "I've had it with this guy. What he did was unacceptable. Nobody can defend that and nobody should." At one point, he broached invoking the Twenty-fifth Amendment, telling colleagues that he might ask the President to resign.

For most of January, Trump's standing in the Party teetered. Moderate members were ready to break with him, and those on the far right had dug in. But the majority weren't sure how to position themselves. "At this point, we don't know where this is going to go," Adam Kinzinger told me. "So let's take the middle, 'Let's just all get along, I just want to get elected to my little district in Kentucky' guy. He's our bellwether. He's kind of sitting there, keeping his head down, trying to figure out what's going to happen." Then, on January 28th, McCarthy travelled to Mar-a-Lago to pay obeisance and pose for a photo. "As soon as he went to Mar-a-Lago, you felt that person shift," Kinzinger said. "That person shifted to begrudgingly defending Donald Trump, and from then it was just off the cliff."

Peter Meijer, a freshman Republican from Michigan, joined the group of ten Republican congresspeople who voted to impeach. "I would love it if leadership shared my minority views. But they are minority views," he told me, a few months after losing his primary. "There are times when followers look to leaders, and there are times when leaders look to followers."

Kinzinger had entered Congress with the Tea Party class, in 2011. He was an Air Force pilot who flew missions in Afghanistan and Iraq; McCarthy featured him in an extended profile in the book "Young Guns." "We had a great relationship until recently," Kinzinger said. McCarthy repeatedly told him that he considered Trump crazy and that his job was "to keep him from doing something super-duper crazy," Kinzinger went on. But it wasn't lost

on him that McCarthy would “light up talking about how often Trump called him.”

On February 3rd, the Republican conference gathered in the auditorium of the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center. Onstage, McCarthy sat in the middle of the leadership team, taking questions and comments on two orders of business. The first was whether Liz Cheney should be kicked out of the Party leadership for insisting that the election had not been stolen. The second was what to do about Marjorie Taylor Greene, then a new freshman. A week before, evidence had surfaced that she had called for the execution of Nancy Pelosi and claimed that the 2018 massacre of seventeen people at a high school in Parkland, Florida, had been staged.

The meeting lasted more than four hours. “We’re expecting Kevin McCarthy to say some stuff about Marjorie Taylor Greene,” Kinzinger said. “I didn’t expect that he was going to kick her out of our committees, but I did expect that he was going to take a stand that Jewish space lasers was a bit of a line too far.” Cheney survived her vote by a secret ballot, with McCarthy giving a perfunctory speech in her defense. He made a more spirited pitch on behalf of Greene. “They’re going after Marjorie for things she said before she even got here,” he told the crowd, according to an audio recording obtained by Draper. “They’re coming at you next.” Kinzinger walked up to one of the corner microphones. “I unleashed,” he told me. “The Party has lost its damn mind,” he said to the group. McCarthy spent “more time defending Marjorie Taylor Greene than saying a word about Liz Cheney.” McCarthy sat with his arms folded while Kinzinger spoke. “He just didn’t give a shit,” he told me.

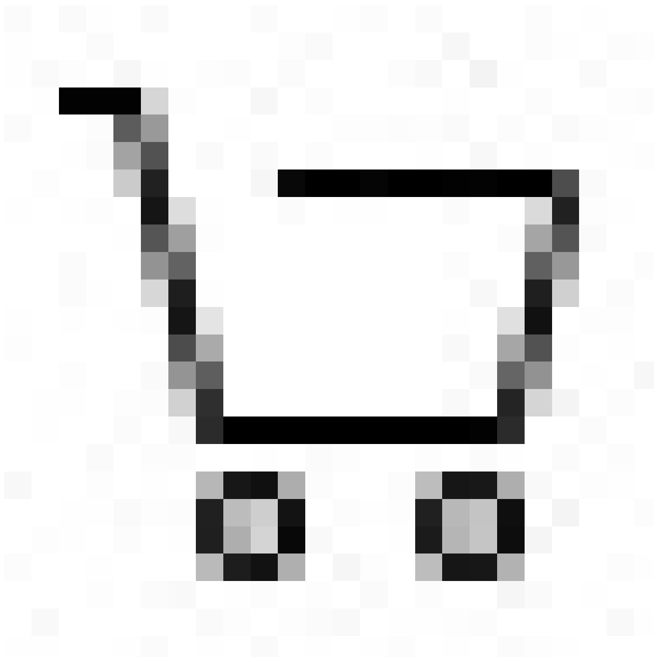


"Oh, great. More teeth."
Cartoon by Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby

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Months later, Kinzinger was in the middle of a conversation near the House floor when McCarthy bumped him hard from behind. “He shoulder-checks me,” Kinzinger told me. “This is the most junior-high place since junior high. And he’s the most junior-high leader.” Kinzinger went on, “I thought it was a good relationship, but you also realize he’s a pretty vacuous, hollow guy who makes everyone think they have a great relationship with him.” (A spokesman for McCarthy called Kinzinger “ridiculous” and “outlandishly vitriolic toward Kevin,” referring to Kinzinger’s criticisms of McCarthy as “unhinged tirades.”)

When congresspeople raised concerns about the Party’s increasingly violent extremism, McCarthy blocked them. Steve Womack, a conservative and a military veteran, resigned from a Republican leadership committee in protest. In the spring of 2021, McCarthy deputized John Katko, a moderate from a pro-Biden district in upstate New York, to negotiate the terms of a bipartisan January 6th commission with House Democrats. The idea had never appealed to McCarthy, but he floated it to keep his options open. In May, Katko came back with a deal: the commission would have subpoena power, and there would be five members from each party. “Katko got a hundred per cent of what Kevin asked for,” Fred Upton told me. (Katko declined to speak to me.) But, after Trump criticized the commission as a “Democrat trap,” McCarthy withdrew his support and voted against it. “I

had one Republican tell me the day or two before, ‘Fred, you won’t believe me, but I’m actually going to vote for this. I think that it’s fair,’ ” Upton said. “At the end of the day, he voted no because of Trump—Kevin wasn’t going to take him on.”

Cheney brought up her opposition to Trump any time she could, and because she was the third-highest-ranking Republican she frequently appeared alongside McCarthy when she did so. The last time they spoke together in public was after a press conference in late February, when a reporter asked if Trump should speak at an upcoming meeting of the Conservative Political Action Conference. “Yes,” McCarthy said. Cheney said, “I don’t believe that he should be playing a role in the future of the Party or the country.” “On that high note, thank you very much,” McCarthy said, and walked off.

In a second vote that May, with McCarthy in the majority, Cheney was ousted from the leadership. He then campaigned against her in her primary that summer. “McCarthy went out of his way to make an example out of Liz,” a Republican who is close to both of them told me. “He did so because he knew she was going to lose. It was unprecedented to back the opponent of a member of the leadership team. The message was, If you go against Kevin, there are going to be consequences.”

It’s easy to imagine a scenario in which Kevin McCarthy was the Republican hero of 2022. Had the Party won more seats in the House, he could have claimed that he built a decisive majority by controlling the middle and the extreme right, defying the laws of political gravity. Last winter, he confronted an old friend, Jaime Herrera Beutler, of Washington, who voted to impeach Trump and eventually lost to an election denier in the primary. McCarthy had told her about the call he’d had with the President on January 6th, which she later shared with the press. “I alone am taking all the heat to protect people from Trump!” McCarthy told her. “I alone am holding the Party together!” (Herrera Beutler and McCarthy disputed this account when it was first reported, by Bade and Demirjian.)

Just as he had in 2010, McCarthy recruited a diverse and promising class of candidates in 2022, uniting them under a broad and usefully nondescript platform called Commitment to America. He also helped raise five hundred million dollars, including two hundred and sixty million dollars for the

Congressional Leadership Fund, the Party's largest House super *PAC*. It spent heavily to support moderate candidates against far-right challengers. Herrera Beutler received money, as did David Valadao, a McCarthy ally, who represents a largely Hispanic district next to his that went for Biden in 2020. The bet made by the Republican establishment, Peter Meijer told me, "was that you can split the difference between traditional Republicans and pathways to the majority while also humoring Trump. I don't think that's a bet that paid off." Although Valadao became one of only two of the ten Republican impeachers to win reëlection, after McCarthy persuaded Trump not to attack him, Herrera Beutler's seat went to a Democrat for the first time in eleven years.

McCarthy has spent the past seven years, since he last ran for Speaker, working to shore up his support on the right. Previously, Freedom Caucus members were not given the top jobs on committees, because Party leadership considered them too extreme. McCarthy has brought figures such as Jim Jordan into the establishment—Jordan will soon have one of the most prestigious jobs in the conference, the chairmanship of the Judiciary Committee, where he'll have the power to harass the Administration.

"The way he maneuvers is he gives everyone what they want," the senior Hill staffer said, of McCarthy. "It's all about member management. His constituents are the members of the Republican conference."

Yet now McCarthy is going to the January 3rd floor vote on a knife's edge. The day that he won the first round of voting for the Speakership, Don Bacon, a pragmatic Republican congressman from Nebraska, issued a threat of his own. Why should the Freedom Caucus be calling all the shots? Bacon considers McCarthy the only serious contender for Speaker. But, if the conference failed to coalesce around him, Bacon said, "I'm going to work with like-minded people across the aisle to find someone agreeable for Speaker."

McCarthy had recruited Bacon to run for Congress in 2015, after hearing him give a speech in support of a candidate who went on to lose his race. The day after the election, Bacon told me, "I got two calls, one from the county chairman. Got another guy said he wanted to be my campaign manager. I wasn't even thinking about running." Bacon is a member of the

bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus and the Main Street Republicans, whose numbers, Bacon said, are larger than those of the Freedom Caucus. The problem is that their unwillingness to wreak general havoc makes it harder to "flex our muscles." He said, "We're not going to let a minority of a minority of our party—it's a small number—just hold the rest of Congress and the country hostage. At some point, people like me are going to say, Enough is enough!"

McCarthy seized Bacon's threat to strike a deal with Democrats as a way of scaring the far right into backing him; it may be the strongest argument he has. "If we don't do this right, the Democrats can take the majority," he told Newsmax. "If we play games on the floor, the Democrats can end up picking who the Speaker is."

In October, when the prospective majority looked bigger, McCarthy was careful not to oversell an agenda based on vengeance. He was sending a message to congresspeople such as Bacon, who badly wants to legislate. Before the midterms McCarthy said, "I think the country doesn't like impeachment used for political purposes at all. . . . I think the country wants to heal and . . . start to see the system that actually works."

Since then, he's issued threats about investigating Biden and his Cabinet, signalled that he's willing to oppose raising the country's debt ceiling, and suggested that he'll investigate the January 6 Committee. On November 22nd, he travelled to El Paso to deliver a menacing speech about immigration and the Secretary of Homeland Security, Alejandro Mayorkas: "If Secretary Mayorkas does not resign, House Republicans will investigate every order, every action, and every failure to determine whether we can begin impeachment inquiries." A number of Republicans I interviewed said that impeaching Mayorkas would count as a "moderate" outcome in the 118th Congress.

"The debt limit scares the shit out of me," Kinzinger told me. "Because here's the thing. In the past, Boehner or Ryan can eventually cut a deal and rely on fifty of us to vote for it. . . . It's going to be hard for McCarthy to cut deals. That freaks me out."

It is an indication of the state of the Republican conference that McCarthy's most clear-eyed critics still see him as the only rational check left. He may embody a vast range of contradictory identities and principles, but at least one set of them dates to the pre-Trump era. Mike Madrid, who worked with McCarthy in California and went on to co-found the Lincoln Project, the anti-Trump group, told me that McCarthy was "the last person I felt comfortable being critical of." He had trouble believing that "my Kevin" was his Kevin, he said. "Which guy was he all along?"

Recently, McCarthy has been in marathon meetings with members of the Freedom Caucus, trying to reach agreements on changes to the House rules. The one demand he has actively resisted is the "motion to vacate the chair," the strategy that pressured Boehner: it would allow a single member to force a vote on McCarthy's ouster. It's the only deal breaker for McCarthy because it's the only one that directly threatens his Speakership. He appears to be flexible on nearly everything else. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Philip Gourevitch

Puzzles & Games Dept.

- There Goes the Neighborhood
- Bagel Shop
- The Cover Crossword
- Pattern Recognition Trivia Game
- My Life in Five Guesses or Less
- Sounds About Right
- Comedy of Errors
- Sight Gags

By [Edward Steed]

By Joon Pahk

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By Dennard Dayle

By Matt Jackson

By Liz Maynes-Aminzade

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- R.S.V.P. Regrets Generator for the Overscheduled

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- **Tragicomic Creatures Great and Small**
- **Some Stress-Free Funnies**

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By Anthony Lane

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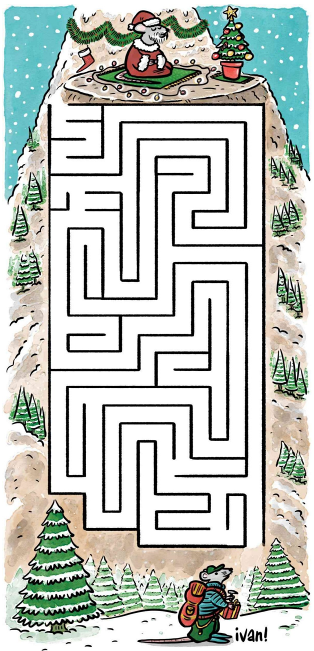
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Sketchpad

- Seeking a Path to Enlightenment (or Cheese)

By [Ivan Ehlers]



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By Philip Gourevitch

Tables for Two

- **The Buoyant Cheer of Björk Café & Bistro**

By [Hannah Goldfield]

If there's a more cheerful person in New York City than the chef Ulrika Bengtsson, who grew up in the Swedish countryside, eating moose hunted by her father and prepared by her mother, I'd like to meet her. "I was born full of energy," she writes in the surprisingly stirring "About" section of her LinkedIn profile, and I don't doubt it for a second. At her newest restaurant, a café called Björk, in the lobby of Scandinavia House, a Nordic cultural center in midtown, Bengtsson bounds around the dining room beaming, with a buoyancy that can't be learned.

A good personality doesn't necessarily translate into good food, of course, but at Björk it feels like the secret ingredient. Patrons of Ulrika's, the homey Upper East Side restaurant that Bengtsson ran from 1999 to 2006 (before that, she cooked at the Swedish consulate and at Aquavit), will be thrilled to reunite with her bisque: Arctic char, salmon, cod, and crunchy cold-water shrimp are nestled with fingerling potato, carrots, and leeks and then bathed tableside in a light, creamy saffron-and-fennel broth. During a recent meal at Björk, the air became heady with the powerful perfume of bacon, which emerged from the kitchen moments later, paired with lingonberry preserves atop a thin, golden-edged waffle, made from a grated-potato-based batter, that could be broken into heart-shaped quarters.

When I tried the same waffle topped with seaweed roe and dairy-free sour cream, I suspected that there had been a mistake; had I been given the whitefish roe and regular sour cream instead? "No, that's the seaweed!" Bengtsson said, laughing, as she made her rounds. "Isn't it amazing?" When I inquired about the provenance of the tiny, gently briny orange orbs, indistinguishable from tobiko, she leaned in and mock-whispered, "*IKEA*."

The *smørrebrød*, or open-faced sandwiches, such as one spread with "Gentleman's delight," a salad of herring and hard-boiled egg, are lovely and light. The open-faced *tunnbröd*, similar to Norwegian *lefse*, here a pan-fried, mashed-potato-based flatbread, is much heavier, topped with more mashed potato, pickled cucumber, fried onions, mustard, and two charred hot dogs, their ends split open like flower petals. Heartier still is a beautiful plate of tender, fatty brisket, sliced into batons and strewn with bits of roasted carrot, zucchini, and potato and a tangy parsley cream sauce.

In the Scandinavia House gift shop, among miniature-woollen-sweater Christmas-tree ornaments and Pippi Longstocking dolls, there's a book that purports to teach you how to achieve *hygge*, the Danish concept of coziness, in your home. If that sounds like too much work, Björk's rotating menu of *dagens* (Swedish for "dishes of the day") provides a potent dose. A seeded roll, with a saucer of dimpled butter balls, precedes a wooden tray holding a cup of black coffee, a tiny mug of sweet-and-sour borscht, a bowl of mixed lettuces dressed lightly in lemon and olive oil, and something wonderful as the centerpiece: on Tuesdays, it's a neat square of *laxpudding*, a gratin layered with sliced potato, onion, and gravlax, finished with brown butter and shaved horseradish. The smorgasbord plate is *hygge*, too, an array of treats including Swedish meatballs, two types of herring, a triangle of Priest XO cheese, and a ramekin of "Jansson's temptation," a casserole of shredded potato and marinated sprats, sealed with crispy bread crumbs.

For dessert, the waffle-maker is employed again: a sweet version made with milk and vanilla is topped with whipped cream and raspberry jam. There are cakes, pastries, and cookies, too, such as *kolakakor*, a snappy shortbread that tastes of salted caramel, plus, in the gift shop, the next generation of Swedish fish, in flavors like elderflower and sour blueberry and in shapes like turbot and pike. Kolsvart, the brand that makes them, in Malmö, donates part of the proceeds to promote healthy waters and fish stocks. *(Dishes $9-$29.)* ♦

By Ginny Hogan

By Susan B. Glasser

By Naaman Zhou

The Boards

- **The World's Most Important Musical About the World's Most Important Band**

The World’s Most Important Musical About the World’s Most Important Band

The director Alex Ross Perry workshops his musical “Slanted! Enchanted!,” about Pavement, a band most of the cast had never heard, as part of a larger film project on the slacker-rock crew.

By Hannah Seidlitz



Alex Ross Perry, the filmmaker, was pacing the stage of the Sheen Center, on Bleecker Street, the other day, flanked by Broadway actors. He was directing a workshop of “Slanted! Enchanted!: A Pavement Musical,” about the Stockton slacker-rock quintet. Perry created the piece to feature in a screwball movie about the band which he is also directing, and which he has described variously as “a semiotic experiment” and “like throwing spaghetti at the wall.” The scene at hand was the show’s climactic finale, inspired by the medley that concludes “The Phantom of the Opera.” He was unhappy with the a-cappella coda. “I need it to be like ‘My World,’ ” he explained. (He was referring to the final song on the Guns N’ Roses album “Use Your

Illusion II," in which Axl Rose pivoted the band to a more industrial sound.) The cast looked at him blankly.

Michael Esper, the show's flannel-shirted lead, who'd starred in Green Day's "American Idiot" on Broadway, was the only one who got Perry's reference. "We should rap?" he said.

"This is not a joke," Perry said, and asked the composer Dabney Morris to play the Guns N' Roses track.

"I feel like I'm being punked right now," Morris muttered, as he cued it up.

On the set, which was bedecked in Pavement totems (nineties tour posters, cutout stars, grimy pink bathtub tile, a fire-breathing dragon, llamas), the cast and crew listened as Rose's guttural screeching rattled the proscenium. Someone interrupted to mention a burning smell onstage. "That's just dust on the lights," a production designer yelled from the mezzanine.

It was the company's second full run-through at the Sheen Center, and the next day they would present the show to an audience. When tickets for the two performances went on sale, buyer interest crashed the Web site.

"No one knows what they're doing," Perry, who is thirty-eight, said. He doesn't play an instrument, and he had just learned the difference between upstage and downstage the previous week. The closest thing to a musical that he'd directed was his last film, "Her Smell," which starred Elisabeth Moss as a self-destructive musician. "But we do have two leads from Broadway rock musicals who can tell us what we're doing wrong"—besides Esper, there was Kathryn Gallagher, from Alanis Morissette's "Jagged Little Pill." The rest of the cast was more familiar with Andrew Lloyd Webber than with Pavement.

Three years ago, Pavement's label, Matador Records, approached Perry about a collaboration. The band wanted a movie, but Stephen Malkmus, the front man, said he wasn't interested in hiring a documentary filmmaker. He wanted to hire a screenwriter. But he didn't want a screenplay. "No one knew what that meant," Perry said.

Perry resolved to approach the impossible assignment from impossible angles: “Legitimate, ridiculous, real, fake, idiotic, cliché, illogical,” he said, and offered a Bob Dylan analogy. “You take the Todd Haynes Bob Dylan movie, the Scorsese documentary, the Pennebaker documentary, and the movie Dylan himself directed that everyone hates”—“Renaldo and Clara”—“and put them all in a blender.” The resulting film will be a mélange of bio-pic, museum footage, bits of “Slanted! Enchanted!,” tour doc, farce, and paean. Perry formulated his own thesis: What if Pavement, the Pynchonian rock group that never had a platinum record, was the most important band of all time?

Watching his actors rehearse an elaborate tap number in Santa costumes, Perry said, “Malkmus is neck and neck with Sondheim in terms of his narrative storytelling, his sense of allusion and wordplay. ” (“Maybe someone’s going to save me / my heart is made of gravy.”)

For a scene set to “Date with *IKEA*,” Esper was being wheeled around in a blue Toys R Us shopping cart.

“Michael looks extremely displeased,” Perry said. He asked the actor how he felt about being pushed in the cart.

Esper responded enthusiastically. He paused and said, “And then I’m, like, Uh-oh, I’m in an *IKEA* coffin.”

“We’re wondering, is it better if you’re out of the cart? If you’re pushing the cart?” Perry asked. “Or if we’re maybe overthinking the cart?”

“It’s a long time in the cart,” Esper said.

On opening night, the cart carried Esper triumphantly into the spotlight. During the bows, people threw bouquets and the audience gave a standing ovation. Perry looked contented. “The ultimate joke is that it’s actually good,” he said. ♦

By Helen Shaw

By Ian Crouch

By Dan Greene

By Helen Shaw

The Current Cinema

- “Avatar: The Way of Water” Is Split by James Cameron’s Contradictory Instincts

By Anthony Lane

Another blue movie. Thirteen years after "Avatar," we have a sequel. The director, as before, is James Cameron, who has promised (or threatened) further installments. The new film is subtitled "The Way of Water," which sounds like the memoir of a celebrity urologist. Once again, the center of operations is a moon called Pandora, whose inhabitants, the Na'vi, have azure skin, luminescent freckles, and magic ponytails that they plug into plants and animals. They are at one with nature and at sixes and sevens with encroaching humans, most of whom are nasty, brutish, and so short that they barely come up to the Na'vi's navels.

The hero of the first movie was a mortal man, Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), who went rogue, native, and nuts for a Na'vi named Neytiri (Zoe Saldaña). In the end, he became a full-fledged Pandoran, in body, mind, and all-round spiritual oomph. The big news, in "The Way of Water," is that he and Neytiri have been busy in the intervening period, spawning three children and adopting a couple more. (Cameron is too prim to reveal exactly how the spawning works, but I'm sure it must be heavy on the ponytails.) They all live together in a forest, bathed in bliss, until, one day, descending spaceships signal the return of *Homo sapiens*—specifically, a military task force, led by General Ardmore (Edie Falco), which wastes no time in churning up the soil and setting fire to innocent trees.

These early scenes of destruction recall the nuclear inferno that Cameron dramatized in "Terminator 2: Judgment Day" (1991), and they verify the strange—one might say pathological—contradictions in his instincts. On the one hand, we have Cameron the vegan, as green as the Na'vi are blue, who likes nothing better than to plumb the mysteries of the deep in a submersible. On the other hand, we have Cameron the hard-core weapons guy and tech fetishist, whose works resound to stuttering guns and the whirr, shunt, and click of metal upon metal. It's as if Sir David Attenborough divided his time between birds of paradise and monster trucks.

The split is all too visible in the look, and in the structure, of Cameron's latest film. To nobody's surprise, Jake becomes the chief of the anti-human resistance, riding his mount—a dragonfly the size of a dragon, sporting pretty wings—into battle against a thundering train. (Had he been around in 1962, he would have seen Peter O'Toole pull a similar stunt in "Lawrence of

Arabia.") Opposing him is Quaritch (Stephen Lang), a marine colonel who has taken on Na'vi form: a cunning disguise, rendered utterly useless by his telltale crewcut. The only solution is for Jake, Neytiri, and the kids to quit the woods and make for the seaside; the central phase of the movie tacks back and forth, over and over, between the splashy utopia of their new home and the dark machinations of Quaritch and his ilk as they prepare to hunt Jake down.

Life by the shore is a shock. The local Na'vi are of a turquoise tint, with thick and finny tails, and they can swim as smoothly as they can run. Think of them as Na'vi seals. Jake's children get picked on for being landlubbers, but there are compensations: the sea abounds with funky creatures, including a whale that understands sign language, and there's a splendid moment when Jake's adopted daughter, who is super-attuned to all sentient things, fends off a hostile human, beneath the waves, by urging a spindly invertebrate to wrap the attacker in its tendrils. Now you know: my enemy's anemone is my friend. What, however, is the point of these marvels? Do they really advance the plot, or could it be that the film is an excuse, or at least an opportunity, for the refining of Cameron's craft? Remember "Finding Nemo" (2003), which was a showcase for what Pixar could do with water, ripples and all? Well, this movie gives off the same proud gleam, magnified to the max.

The original "Avatar" inspired a resurgence of 3-D, which soon subsided, in less audacious hands. Now it's back for the sequel, and if you've missed the rare sensation of being poked in the eye by an arrow tip, or of 3-D spectacles slipping sweatily down your nose, enjoy the ride. The film is more than three hours long, some of it dangerously close to dawdling; not until the final third does Cameron apply the whip and remind us that, in the choreographing of action sequences, he remains unsurpassed. We are treated to a straight fight between Quaritch's men, who are on board a flying boat equipped for the slaughter of whales, and Jake's oceanic troops, roused to fury from their love of peace. The moral combat could not be more simplistic, yet all the Cameron trademarks are in play: the thrill of the chase, the eruptions of flame, the near-feral rage to protect the young—Neytiri is akin to Ripley, in "Aliens" (1986), shielding a little girl from a beast—and, as in "Titanic" (1997), the vertiginous tilt as a vessel is sucked down into the gloom. Factor in "The Abyss" (1989) and you have to ask: What *is* it with James Cameron and H_2O? Did he almost drown in the bath as a boy? Is he

part sponge? "The way of water has no beginning and no end," Jake is told. Brace yourself, and breathe in.

There is a poem by William Empson, "This Last Pain," in which the poet imagines that we could "learn a style from a despair." Useful advice, I have always found, and it certainly comes to mind, crystallized in the glint of minor gestures, whenever Bill Nighy appears onscreen. His manners—the fidgety languor, the politesse, the way that he delivers a line of dialogue as if trying to cross a busy road—would be mannerisms, were it not for the pressure of feeling that gathers behind them. All of which renders him fit for "Living," in which he plays a very British civil servant, Mr. Williams, who receives a diagnosis of terminal cancer. Or, as he prefers to phrase it, "This is rather a bore, but the doctors have given me six months." His last pain, indeed.

The movie is directed by Oliver Hermanus and written by the Nobel laureate Kazuo Ishiguro. It is adapted from "Ikiru," Akira Kurosawa's sorrowful tale of a doomed Tokyo bureaucrat, which was released in Japan in 1952. Hermanus's version is set in the nineteen-fifties, largely in London, where Mr. Williams heads a Department of Public Works. Custom demands that any private works—the unpleasantly dramatic fact of mortality, for instance—be kept under wraps. Even the journey to the office requires discretion: when a new employee, Mr. Wakeling (Alex Sharp), meets his colleagues on a suburban station platform, all of them clad in suits and topped with bowler hats, he is advised against conviviality. "Bit like church," someone says. Amen.

So diffident is the care with which "Living" is arranged that I began to wonder if it was actually *made* by Mr. Williams, in secret, from beyond the veil. "Mr. Zombie," he is called by Miss Harris (Aimee Lou Wood), the cheeriest member of his staff, when he ventures to take her out for lunch. "Sort of dead but not dead," she adds. He seems unoffended. Only gradually do we realize that he's a widower; the film sidles up to him, in lieu—or in fear—of confronting him head on. In contrast to the starkness of "Ikiru," which opens with an X-ray of a diseased stomach, it takes a while before we even notice Mr. Williams in a doctor's waiting room, sitting quietly and preparing for bad news. We keep approaching him via other people, including his son, his daughter-in-law, Mr. Wakeling, Miss Harris, and the

lone bohemian of the story, a fellow named Sutherland (Tom Burke), in whom our hero confides on a trip to the coast, and who drags him along on a nocturnal binge. So compelling are Nighy and Burke that I will watch them in anything, yet their spree, drenched in rich and hazy colors, doesn't quite ring true. Maybe Mr. Williams is dreaming the whole thing.

"Living" carries echoes of "The Remains of the Day," the 1993 film of Ishiguro's famous novel, in which Anthony Hopkins stars as a butler whose soul has been ironed flat, like a tablecloth. Both films face the same challenge. When actors as resourceful and as intuitive as Hopkins and Nighy play wilted or limited men, do we honestly believe in the result, or are we spectators at a brilliant show? Mr. Williams asks Miss Harris if his new hat will "go down a storm," and takes her to see "I Was a Male War Bride" (1949)—Cary Grant in drag!—at the pictures, but those are hardly Williams-like activities. They speak of something more precious: a gentleman dandy with one foot, beautifully shod, in the grave. The end is Nighy. ♦

By Anthony Lane

By Richard Brody

By Richard Brody

By John Cassidy

The Theatre

- **“Merrily We Roll Along” and “Some Like It Hot” Bring Blockbuster Energy to the Stage**

“Merrily We Roll Along” and “Some Like It Hot” Bring Blockbuster Energy to the Stage

Brilliant casting and a palpable sense of joy make old stories feel new.

By [Helen Shaw]



“It’s our time, breathe it in,” the friends Frank (Jonathan Groff), Charley (Daniel Radcliffe), and Mary (Lindsay Mendez) sing ecstatically at the end of “Merrily We Roll Along,” Stephen Sondheim’s much beleaguered musical about three artists and their deteriorating relationships and ambitions. Time in the musical goes backward: we first meet the trio during their lowest point (basically, their forties), so the youthful optimism of those last, hopeful lines is meant to sound false. In this “Merrily,” though, it rings sincere, as if claiming a long-delayed triumph on the musical’s behalf. Anticipation for the new production has been frantic. “I heard the whole run sold out in eight minutes,” someone whispered behind me at the New York Theatre Workshop, as we waited for the show to begin.

“Merrily” has traditionally been painted as not just a minor work but a clunker in Sondheim’s catalogue. Opening on Broadway in 1981 to a disastrous reception, it closed after only sixteen performances, and, in the decades that followed, both the book writer, George Furth, and Sondheim kept tinkering with it. Versions abound. The critical shellacking temporarily wrecked the composer’s relationship with the director Hal Prince, rupturing an incredible streak of collaboration that included “Sweeney Todd” and “Company” and altering everything that came after. But yesterday’s flop is today’s juggernaut: we’re already on the third high-profile New York revival of “Merrily” in ten years; a documentary, Lonny Price’s “Best Worst Thing That Ever Could Have Happened,” came out in 2016; and there’s a Richard Linklater movie in the works. The “Dickensian child in the corner” (as Sondheim called the musical) has grown into the colossus in the doorway.

Frank, Charley, and Mary’s story starts in 1976, with the disappointments of middle age—material success but a broken friendship for Frank and Charley, destructive alcoholism for Mary—and finishes on the day the three met, on a rooftop, in 1957. Scene by scene, moving in reverse chronologically, we see first the betrayals and humiliations, *then* the innocence that preceded them. Frank and Charley write musicals, but Frank’s attention is too easy to divert: he’s left his first wife, Beth (Katie Rose Clarke), for the glamorous Broadway star Gussie (Krystal Joy Brown) and ditched the ambitious artistic plans he had with Charley for the suntanned sheen of Hollywood. Mary, too, is a creative person, though her unrequited passion for Frank has vaguely stymied her. (Her underwritten story line is one of the show’s entrenched flaws.) Of course, every hopeful moment we see in the three friends’ twenty years together, from a wedding to a reunion to a jubilant opening night, has already had its promise extinguished by the time it rolls merrily around. We know how everything ends.

The music tries to make this bleakness bearable. Sondheim’s songs for “Merrily,” including “Not a Day Goes By,” “Good Thing Going,” and “Opening Doors,” are some of his lushest and most richly colored. Gussie’s puzzle of a character is a repository for some rather nasty prejudices about actresses, but at least she gets to sing your socks off, which Brown absolutely does. Frank and Charley’s spiky exchanges with their commercially minded producer, Joe (a scene-stealing, vowel-purring Reg Rogers), hint at Sondheim’s own irritation about being told by critics and

lazy-eared listeners that “There’s not a tune you can hum / There’s not a tune you / go bum-bum-bum-di-dum.” To show those philistines, Sondheim wrote a score that bum-di-dums you into next week.

Sondheim’s contagious, compelling music alone has never quite sufficed, though, and directors have often been tempted to cut or carve the musical into a more pleasing shape. Here, the director, Maria Friedman, barely touches the text. Has her production made Furth’s plot (loosely borrowed from a 1934 Kaufman and Hart play about a callous playwright of boulevard comedies) suddenly logical—that is, do we ever believe that a Broadway composer has somehow turned into a ritzy L.A. movie producer? No. Has the musical grown softer in the years since audiences rejected it for its bitterness and unlikability? Certainly not. Instead, Friedman bypasses narrative logic for what’s deeply true.

Her hyper-energetic staging, based on a 2013 “Merrily” staged for the tiny Menier Chocolate Factory, in London, imagines the musical as a flashback for Frank. A callow jerk is now a *conflicted* jerk, who has a whole choir of regret singing inside him. (The gifted ensemble, more than a dozen strong, haunts him at every turn.) Soutra Gilmour’s set design places the show inside his bland Los Angeles mansion, where a nine-piece mini-orchestra is ensconced on the second floor; this is a “home” so personality-free it can also stand in for a television studio, an alleyway, and that final (first) rooftop. How can we blame Frank for his shallowness? He’s a product of his future environment.

Friedman unearths the potential that Sondheim-heads have always suspected was in “Merrily” by infusing it with enthusiasm, sympathy, and (not to be cheesy about it) love. The show’s three central performers are emotional fire hoses who all palpably adore one another. Radcliffe has a common or garden voice, but he fizzes like a cartoon fuse: any time he moves, he ricochets, and his past as the boy wizard Harry Potter helps the audience fill in the outlines of his boy-genius character. Groff’s silky tenor and angelic face elevate a part that can sometimes be contemptible—for the first time, I could see Frank as both the dreamer who believes in greatness and the glib charmer who believes every lie he tells. And the Tony-winning Mendez, whose staggering, trumpetlike mezzo could be used on battlefields, becomes the heart of the show, even when the lines betray her or scenes exclude her.

“Beware! Retreat! Save yourselves!” Mendez’s clarion call peals forth, when the script says she’s just asking for another drink.

Friedman and her cast are attuned to the ways in which Sondheim and Furth were trying to frame the hapless tenderness we feel for our present selves, not just our past ones. The pair lit their dark project with lightning bolt after lightning bolt—compromise, responsibility, human frailty, the desire to make a living—any one of which can vaporize an ideal on impact. So is this production finally, forty years later, the definitive “Merrily”? It wouldn’t be the first time that a triumphant story started in middle age.

Uptown at the Shubert Theatre, another nostalgic musical—this one set during jazzy, woozy Prohibition—looks backward, too. “Some Like It Hot,” though, likes what it sees. The elegant, frequently wonderful production is a frothy adaptation of Billy Wilder’s 1959 classic film about two jobbing musicians (here, Christian Borle and J. Harrison Ghee) who, after witnessing a gangland shooting, hide out with an all-girl band.

Adaptations of movies about cross-dressing have been like buses lately: if you missed “Tootsie,” in 2019, “Mrs. Doubtfire” was right behind it, waiting in line. It’s odd, isn’t it, that Broadway producers keep picking source material that operates by the same core equation: men + dresses = gags. What a choice to keep making! As much as the original movies pushed boundaries and tweaked prejudices, we now hear in them various notes of misogyny and transphobia. Muting these has led to some uncomfortable creative pretzel-twisting—which is the shape you make when you’re covering your ass.

Although those earlier two musicals accepted their source materials’ basic premises, “Hot” ’s many creators—the composer, Marc Shaiman, who also co-wrote the lyrics; his fellow-lyricist, Scott Wittman; and the book writers, Matthew López and Amber Ruffin—have dislodged the beloved Wilder treasure from its sprockets. There’s a multiracial cast, for one thing, including the Black bandleader Sweet Sue (NaTasha Yvette Williams, driving her astounding voice through songs like a fist through paper) and her lead chanteuse, Sugar Kane (Adrianna Hicks, the powerhouse from “Six”), who here is based more on Lena Horne than on the film’s Marilyn Monroe. And, instead of the original’s winking attitude toward gay panic (“Why

would a guy marry a guy?" "Security!"), the rewriters take a new tack. The nonbinary Ghee plays Jerry, and, as Jack Lemmon did in the film version, blossoms when assuming the Daphne identity. But in this version Daphne emerges as a true self, and Jerry is forgotten. "You could have knocked me over with a feather," Ghee sings in one of the show's finest numbers (while wearing one of the costume designer Gregg Barnes's finest numbers), because "that lady that I'm loving is me."

Too much comparison with the fleet Wilder staging in the film will get you nowhere—in this sumptuous, everything's-a-showstopper version, the director and choreographer, Casey Nicholaw, and company have chosen mass over velocity. Nicholaw goes big, but he isn't quite as inventive as we have seen him before (a slamming-doors chase scene wastes several opportunities for farce), and the throwback musical pastiche by the songwriters, Shaiman and Wittman—songs trying to sound like standards from long ago, but written yesterday—suffers from overamplification, which drowns out the lyrics. (Thankfully, we can hear all the details in Sugar's stunning rendition of "At the Old Majestic Nickel Matinee," the show's wisest, quietest song.) Borle, usually full of demonic energies, keeps his manic light under a bushel. But Ghee soars and soars, glowing every time the show's follow spots pivot around to Daphne. Who says you shouldn't go back? Perhaps there was someone beautiful you missed the first time around, and you want a chance to look again. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

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By Philip Gourevitch

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